

**The Material Semiotics of “Heavy Drinking” among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya:
An Ethnographic Examination.**

By

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Declaration

I, Bernadette Kina Kombo, declare that this dissertation, titled “The Material Semiotics of ‘Heavy Drinking’ among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination,” I composed entirely by myself and has not been submitted in whole or in part for the award of a degree at any other university or institution. All sources used in this dissertation have been appropriately cited, and all assistance received in conducting the research has been duly acknowledged. I affirm that any data, findings, and interpretations presented are the result of my independent research, except where explicitly stated otherwise.

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Abstract

Alcohol consumption is a significant global public health concern. According to the World Health Organization, harmful alcohol use contributed to approximately 2.6 million deaths globally in 2019, accounting for 4.7% of all deaths that year. Young people, in particular, are disproportionately affected by the health and social consequences of harmful alcohol use. In Kenya, national statistics, local research, and news media reports consistently portray problematic drinking as an urgent public health issue requiring intervention. However, current public health interventions tend to prioritize individualistic, biomedical, and prohibitionist approaches that pathologize alcohol use, focusing on policing, restriction, and abstinence as primary interventions. These approaches fail to account for the complex socio-material and structural realities that shape alcohol consumption within localized contexts.

In this dissertation, I critically examine the persistence of problem drinking despite these interventions and explore the broader social, economic, and political realities that sustain it. Between July 2023 and March 2024, I conducted a multi-sited ethnographic study in Taita-Taveta County, Kenya. Drawing on material semiotics, I examine how alcohol functions as a socio-material actant, shaping and being shaped by human and non-human actors, including drinking spaces, regulatory frameworks, economic systems, and cultural practices. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and participatory material-semiotic geospatial mapping, I trace how alcohol consumption is enacted within dynamic networks of sociality, economic vulnerability, gendered norms, and regulatory governance.

I introduce the concept of *Liquid Kinship* to describe how alcohol consumption mediates social bonds by establishing relationships of care, reciprocity, and belonging while also reinforcing dependency, exclusion, and vulnerability. I also develop the concept of

Liquid Fugitivity to capture how individuals within informal alcohol economies strategically evade regulation, negotiate risk, and adapt to economic marginalization and state surveillance.

My dissertation findings demonstrate that problem drinking among young people is not just an individual pathology but a reality woven into broader socio-material assemblages. I recognize this complexity and argue for a paradigmatic shift in alcohol policy and practice. Policymakers must design and reform policies that reflect the lived realities of young people in Taita-Taveta and similar contexts, shifting away from punitive and prohibitionist approaches and toward structural, harm-reduction, and community-led strategies. Achieving this shift requires legalizing and regulating traditional brews, strengthening community-based harm reduction initiatives, expanding local economic opportunities, and reforming licensing frameworks to address corruption and socioeconomic disparities.

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“To Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory...” (Ephesians 3:20-21). Amen.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The television caption “*Tatizo la ulevi Taita-Taveta* [Problematic drinking in Taita-Taveta]” appeared on a news clip that aired on NTV Kenya on November 29, 2020, during their 7 pm bulletin. During the news report, a young man from Taita is asked to reflect upon the issue of drinking in his community. With a serious face, he speaks directly on the issue, saying, “Alcohol in our community is a big problem; we are trying to see how we can address this problematic drinking, but as it is now, it has become a *kidonda ndugu!*” *Kidonda ndugu* is a metaphorical figure of speech commonly used by people on the Kenyan coast, especially when speaking in Kiswahili, to describe what they perceive as a lingering problem or situations or relationships that repeatedly bring suffering or difficulty, and in this context then, is that lingering problem of excessive alcohol use among young people. This Kiswahili metaphor refers to a chronic wound that refuses to heal – an expression that conveys how many people feel about the intractability of problematic drinking in this region of Kenya where I grew up.

The sentiment that there is a persisting drinking problem is reiterated throughout Kenya, across various county contexts and news media outlets. The discourse of “problem drinking” often takes on a highly gendered tone, revolving around women coming out in large numbers to express their moral outrage and seek redress from the government. For example, Standard Media, on November 8, 2014, in their *Eve Woman* section of the Newspaper, featured a story of women picketing against so-called illicit brew. The title read, “Women threaten to invade illicit brew dens to save their men” (see Figure 1 below). The report in *Eve Woman* tells of a protest in the Mwanda location of Taita of hundreds of women marching together, all of whom gathered to

confront what they termed a “drinking menace” in the area. Media reports further frame drinking in gendered terms, as they portray it as having an impact on working men’s capacity to be ‘productive’ and reproduce.

Figure 1: A Newspaper article in The Standard Newspaper on women threatening invasion of illicit brew dens in Mwanda Location, Taita-Taveta.



Seven years later, the same newspaper featured another similarly gendered storyline entitled “Sloshed: The ‘Mbangara lullaby’ enslaving Taita men.” The story depicts a society that has lost hope in the face of heavy drinking with its reference to Taita men being “enslaved” by

alcohol. Furthermore, the journalist covering the story, Renson Mnyamwezi, presents evidence to underscore the depth of problematic drinking among the Taita. For instance, Mnyamwezi cites Msagha Mbogholi, a now-retired high court judge from Taita, who asserts that excessive drinking among the Taita has a long history. According to Mbogholi, the persistence of problem drinking in Taita has been a subject of scholarly inquiry, dating as far back as the early 20th century. In his article, Mnyamwezi directly quotes Mbogholi: “Excessive alcohol had rendered many [Taita] men unproductive.” Mnyamwezi contextualizes Mbogholi’s claim through interviews with locals who express that heavy drinking has worsened with the introduction of more potent home brews.¹ According to one interviewee, “The drink has in the recent past become more lethal [because] some [brewers] are using non-conventional means to increase the drink’s potency and attract clients.”

Such media coverage invokes drinking as an enduring and persistent ‘social problem’ among the Taita people of Taita-Taveta County, which lies in southwestern Kenya. The Taita (also called Wataita and constitute the Wadawida, Wasagalla and Wakasigau as the sub-tribes) are a Kenyan ethnic group located in Taita-Taveta County. They primarily speak *Kidawida* which belongs to the Bantu languages. Traditionally, the Taita held many different cultural ceremonies including those concerning spiritual matters, entertainment, livelihood, and cultural preservation. In all these, alcohol is an integral part of the people’s culture, like many other African communities. Thus, as historian Justin Willis in his work *Potent Brews: A Social History of Alcohol in East Africa 1850-1999* has demonstrated, alcohol still remains central to many people’s social and cultural lives – including in sub-Saharan African contexts, where it comes in many forms and represents many socio-cultural functions (Willis, 2002). Available research for

¹. It should be noted that home brews are primarily produced and sold by women, who often have to contend with repeated invasions and punishment by authorities.

Kenya, for instance, shows that alcohol production and consumption among different cultural communities is historically assigned ritual and symbolic significance that carries invaluable meanings for these communities (Fortes & Harris, 1979; Willis, 2002). Specifically, as historian Bill Bravman (1998) captures in his work *Making Ethnic Ways: Communities and Their Transformations in Taita, Kenya, 1800–1950*, the Taita people use alcohol during different ritual processes marking different life events such as birth and marriage, as well as in rituals of thanksgiving, healing, and “ostracizing calamities.” With respect to healing, individuals with prolonged illness or believed to have had a spell cast on them (*pepo* in the local language) ordinarily, they were taken to traditional healers for treatment. The healers would then use local herbs and *Mbangara* (the Taita traditional brew) to do cleansing (*Kutasa* in Kitaita), as well as for consumption by all those involved in the process (Akombo, 2002; Judge, 2003).

The Taita people, therefore, thought that such rituals, among other cultural practices, offered a desirable sense of security and acceptance, and by adhering to them, they asserted some sort of *Taitaness* in terms of collective identity. The sense of belonging, therefore, carried with it a deeply ingrained pressure to conform to the group norms (Bravman, 1998). Of which, a well-coordinated cultural control mechanism of alcohol consumption existed where only elder men were allowed to drink alcohol. Younger men would only drink once, officially initiated by the elder men, and were taken through the dos and don’ts of alcohol that they were expected to adhere to. Women, on the other hand, were not allowed to drink; it was believed that drunken women would engage in risky sexual behaviours (Willis, 2002). While these gendered and age-related processes have been analyzed through the lens of the cultural reproduction of power and authority over younger men and women (Willis, 2002), for the most part, they may have also played a role in confronting problematic drinking. Younger men would only drink occasionally

in environments controlled by older men, which is consistent with the Taita collective identity of order and work norms (Bravman, 1998).

According to the Bravman (1998), therefore, these cultural systems surrounding drinking began to shift with the twentieth-century economic, political, and socio-cultural changes—including a shift in the dominance from older men to economically empowered young men and women and to Christianity. During this period, Christianity in Taita began to shape an alternative community, one not centred on *Taitaness* or adherence to Taita rituals, but on universalistic church belonging and spiritual fellowship. Christianity forbade cultural practices that were marked by alcohol use, such as *Kutasa*. It then became a struggle to balance two different cultural frameworks, one anchored on church standings and the other on what defined *Taitaness*. Men, in particular, were opposed to Christianity because it was a threat to the power that came with alcohol use. Drinking, therefore, among many men continued, arguing they were keeping to their fathers' and forefathers' ways. This idiom continues to be used to justify one's drinking, to date. Furthermore, the push and pull between Christianity and the notions of traditional systems and processes, in return, weakened the cultural drinking control mechanisms. This prompted the rise of opposing consumption patterns that saw many young people drinking in their quest to be members of the community but at the same time challenging elders' terms of Taita's propriety.

Despite the complexities surrounding alcohol use and the changing socio-cultural meanings of alcohol and alcohol consumption, global public health discourse continues to narrowly frame alcohol consumption as posing a significant risk to the health and wellbeing of individuals, and as carrying negative psycho-social consequences. Particular attention is placed on the bio-physiological harms linked to 'harmful drinking': it has been associated with cardiovascular disease (Biddinger et al., 2022), increased rates of exposure to HIV infection (Rehm et al., 2017), tuberculosis (Lönnroth et al., 2008; Rehm, Samokhvalov, et al., 2009), and

pneumonia (Samokhvalov et al., 2010; Simou et al., 2018), which are documented as among the leading global causes of mortality and disability. Public health often defines “harmful drinking”—also referred to interchangeably with “heavy drinking”, “problematic drinking”, “alcohol misuse”, or “hazardous drinking”—by using predetermined Linkert scales (i.e., number of drinks, alcohol content, and frequency), thus presenting alcohol consumption in positivist, pathological, and universalistic terms. From a psychosocial perspective, alcohol drinking is often linked to “antisocial behaviours” such as the inability to assume social responsibilities, the reoccurrence of interpersonal aggression, the manifestation of inequalities, and the prevalence of risky sexual behaviours (Pine, 2008; Singer, 2012).

The World Health Organization’s 2024 Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health indicates that in 2019, alcohol consumption was responsible for approximately 2.6 million deaths globally, accounting for 4.7% of all deaths (WHO, 2024). This reflects a slight decrease from the 5.3% reported for 2016 (WHO, 2018). However, young people, in particular, are disproportionately affected, with 13% of deaths that are attributable to alcohol consumption occurring among individuals aged between 20-39 years, while heavy drinking is particularly prevalent among those aged between 15-24 years – peaking in the 20-24 years age group (Shield & Rehm, 2015; WHO, 2018; WHO, 2024). In addition, alcohol use is linked to a high burden of disease and injury, contributing 5.1% of all DALYs in 2016.

In the Kenyan context, an examination of news media reports and relevant literature suggests an increasing trend in alcohol-related harms pertaining to young people (see, for example, (Degenhardt et al., 2018; Gitatui et al., 2019; Takahashi et al., 2017; WHO, 2016). These include an increase in mental health issues, financial strain, high-risk sexual behaviours, road traffic accidents, and violence (including sexual-based, gender-based, and domestic violence) (Kamenderi et al., 2020). In general, national statistics on the effects of alcohol use

paint a picture of problematic drinking as an urgent public health problem demanding intervention.

My dissertation research challenges the dominant public health logic that reduces drinking to a biomedical and statistical problem, framing it solely as pathological. Instead, my ethnographic study shows that alcohol—particularly so-called problematic drinking—operates as both a material and symbolic force within broader socio-political and economic structures. The study demonstrates how alcohol functions as an actant, shaping social realities, mediating relationships, and carrying both risk and meaning. Through intergenerational blessing rituals and the social classification of different alcoholic beverages, alcohol actively structures everyday life. Moreover, this research examines the spatial material dimensions of drinking. It highlights how alcohol consumption unfolds within formal and informal geographies. Alcohol does not merely circulate within these spaces; it transforms them, structuring patterns of social interaction, economic survival, and regulatory governance. Problematic drinking, therefore, does not occur in isolation but emerges through negotiations within licensed establishments, informal dens, and contested drinking spaces, hence becoming an important mediator of market economies and commercial culture.

My dissertation research further reveals alcohol's role in forging kinship, dependency, and sociality, showing how drinking extends beyond ordinary consumption to function as an agent in social reproduction. Economic entanglements, reciprocal exchanges, and obligations tied to care reinforce that problematic drinking is not an individual behaviour but a practice embedded within moral economies.

Chapter 6 of this dissertation also situates problematic drinking within the structural and political-economic forces that sustain illicit alcohol markets. The study traces how drinking, especially of unregulated home brews like *Mbangara*, *Pasha* and *Chang'aa*, intertwines with

regulatory evasion, state policing, and survival strategies. These dynamics, which I frame through the concept of *liquid fugitivity*, demonstrate how marginalization, governance, and economic precarity actively shape alcohol consumption. At the same time, I explore alcohol as an embodied experience, showing how drinking marks the body through pleasure, harm, dependency, and recovery. Here, my study moves beyond biomedical discourses that frame alcohol solely as toxic or dangerous and instead foregrounds drinking as a negotiation of survival, identity, and sociality. The moral distinctions between “respectable” and “illicit” drinks further complicate intervention strategies that rely on prohibitionist approaches.

This ethnographic study moves beyond reductionist public health narratives and instead situates problematic drinking within historical, economic, political, and cultural processes. By analyzing alcohol as a socially and materially embedded practice, this dissertation research offers a more nuanced foundation for developing interventions that are context-sensitive and responsive to the lived realities of drinkers.

Study Significance and Context

My dissertation research critically examines the structural, social, material, and semiotic processes that shape “problematic drinking” in Taita-Taveta County. The findings reveal that alcohol consumption is deeply entangled with broader socio-political and economic realities, challenging dominant public health frameworks that reduce drinking to a biomedical problem. By conceptually foregrounding the lived experiences, spaces, and materialities of drinking, this research unsettles epidemiological narratives, such as those from the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018)—which depicts rising alcohol use in the Global South without engaging the underlying global inequalities, regulatory contradictions, and localized meanings that shape consumption practices.

Public health discourse in sub-Saharan Africa often attributes harmful alcohol use to unrecorded and illicit brews, framing them as dangerous due to their high ethanol content and potential contamination (Ferreira-Borges et al., 2016; Mkuu et al., 2018, 2019; Rehm, Mathers, et al., 2009; Takahashi et al., 2017). However, the findings of this study reveal that drinking practices cannot be understood solely through regulatory concerns about safety and legality. Instead, illicit and informal alcohol economies emerge within complex social, economic, and political structures, where alcohol is more than a substance; it is a means of survival, a source of kinship, and a contested site of governance. Despite extensive public health and media discourse on alcohol-related harms, research on the material and symbolic dimensions of problematic drinking in Kenya remains scarce. The findings demonstrate that informal alcohol markets operate within intricate networks of production, distribution, and consumption, shaped by local histories, governance failures, and socio-economic precarity. These insights provide critical evidence for rethinking alcohol policy beyond universalist interventions that fail to account for localized realities.

Unlike HIV global health research in Kenya, which has evolved into a well-funded transnational infrastructure, alcohol research remains fragmented and under-resourced. The existing national alcohol consumption data disproportionately focuses on Kenya's central region, creating a distorted national picture. However, ethnographic data from my dissertation challenges this narrow geographic focus, revealing that problematic drinking is not confined to a single region but is a countrywide phenomenon shaped by diverse, multiple, localized realities (Gitatui et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2020; Takahashi et al., 2017). By centring Taita-Taveta County, this research expands the scope of alcohol studies in Kenya and addresses critical knowledge gaps. The findings further demonstrate that rural drinking contexts remain severely underexplored, despite evidence that alcohol-related harms are likely to be underreported in these settings. Given

that global trends suggest a decline in heavy drinking (WHO, 2024), in my dissertation research, I interrogate whether such reductions reflect genuine behavioural shifts or gaps in data collection, particularly in rural, under-researched areas.

Beyond contributing to knowledge production, this study critically evaluates existing alcohol policies at local and national levels, which continue to criminalize informal and home-brewed alcohol while privileging commercially produced varieties. My dissertation findings highlight how local brews such as *Mbangara*, *Chang'aa*, and *Pasha* remain central to everyday life in Taita-Taveta, despite legal and policy efforts to regulate them. Recognizing these realities, the Taita-Taveta County Assembly recently passed a motion to legalize traditional brews' production and consumption (County Assembly of Taita Taveta 2024). While this aligns with the Alcoholic Drinks Control Act (2010) at the national level, my dissertation research reveals that both legal frameworks remain challenging to implement, as the regulatory focus on taxation, licensing, and packaging disregards the realities of informal alcohol economies (National Council for Law Reporting, 2010; Papas et al., 2010; County Assembly of Taita-Taveta , 2024). My findings demonstrate that rather than reducing harm, restrictive alcohol laws contribute to the marginalization of producers, the expansion of illicit markets, and the persistence of regulatory evasion.

By attending to the socio-material and relational dimensions through which problematic drinking is produced, enacted, and regulated, this research challenges simplistic interventions that frame alcohol use as an individual moral failing or a purely biomedical concern. The findings demonstrate that effective policy responses must account for the complex entanglements that sustain alcohol consumption, including economic necessity, sociality, and governance failures.

Methodologically, this research prioritizes the ‘*hows*’ of problematic drinking (Law, 2007) and also considers the ‘*whys*’, describing and explaining the everyday practices, performances, and negotiations shaping drinking behaviours, including the macro-structural forces (Fine, 2005). As an ‘*insider*’,² my linguistic fluency, socialization, and deep familiarity with the local environment facilitated ethnographic access to rich, meaning-centred data. The findings confirm that *insider-led* research allows for deeper engagement with social realities, challenging the notion that “doing anthropology at home” is inherently limiting (Onyango-Ouma, 2006). What matters is not the insider/outsider dichotomy but the researcher’s ability to position themselves within the community and negotiate relationships of trust, while maintaining a reflective and critical analytical distance.

At the same time, the research acknowledges the shifting nature of positionality, as gender, educational background, and social status influenced access to certain drinking spaces and interactions. While embedded within the community, my position as a researcher introduced moments of insider-outsider tension, particularly within drinking cultures where performative belonging often dictates participation. These dynamics required continuous negotiation of access and interpretation, reinforcing that ethnographic research is always a process of relational positioning. By remaining reflexive about these dynamics, my dissertation research ensures that the findings are deeply grounded in the lived realities of those most impacted by problematic drinking.³

² Cognizant of the tensions surrounding the insider/outsider dichotomy, the insider reference here means being a native Taita. I later discuss in detail my positionality as both an insider and outsider.

³ Achieved by actively practicing defamiliarization by building on the localized community knowledge, challenging shared commonalities, and not allowing one's own narratives to get in the way.

Research aims and objectives.

The overall aim of my dissertation study is to provide an ethnographic account of the relational and everyday enactment of different realities of supposedly problematic drinking among young people in Kenya. Drawing on my own experiences related to alcohol consumption within the community, the proposed research seeks to understand the interwoven material and semiotic conditions of problematic drinking in Taita-Taveta, situating it broadly within critical medical anthropology's tradition of understanding the underlying social and structural conditions of human suffering. I also borrow from the broad conceptual field of Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 1996) by treating alcohol as an important "actant" that interacts with humans and mediates human behaviour to understand better how material conditions shape a constellation of socialities and meanings of alcohol consumption in general, and problematic drinking in particular. The overarching objectives of the research are as follows:

- 1) To map and characterize the contemporary geospatial distribution, interconnections, and embeddedness of drinking spaces, drink types, and drinking populations through the lens of the different stakeholders.
 - a. To critically examine the localized symbolic framings and representations of problematic drinking, including from a broadly gendered perspective, in Taita-Taveta County
- 2) To situate young people's "drinking problem" as interwoven with wider forms of socio-material and structural complexities and multiple realities (including those that are gendered) that shape their everyday lives.

- 3) To provide contextual insights and recommendations for sustainable policies, programs, and specific interventions that account for the complexity of problematic drinking.

Literature Review

Anthropological Contributions to Alcohol Studies

Alcohol use has long been stigmatized due to the health and social problems associated with it, a phenomenon rooted in historical temperance movements that framed alcohol consumption as a moral failing rather than a health issue (Blocker, 1989; Heath, 2000). As a result, the subject was largely neglected in research, and little consideration was given to health interventions (Levine, 1978; Singer, 2012). It was not until the 1950s that major global health organizations, such as the WHO, began to address the healthcare implications of alcohol use, culminating in their 1977 report on alcohol-related problems (Trotter, 1988; World Health Assembly 30, 1977). In the 1960s, excessive alcohol use, termed alcoholism, was officially recognized as a disease by the American Medical Association, a pivotal shift that legitimized scientific research into its prevalence, causes, and consequences (Gunzerath et al., 2011; Jellinek, 1960). This paradigm shift facilitated the development of evidence-based interventions and policies, marking a turning point in how alcohol use was understood and addressed in healthcare settings (Babor, 2010; Room et al., 2005).

The framing of excessive alcohol use as a disease has remained a contentious issue, sparking debates that extend beyond medicine and public health into disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. Anthropology, in particular, has played a critical role in challenging the biomedical model of alcohol use by emphasizing its socio-cultural dimensions. While early anthropological interest in alcohol emerged in the late 19th century,

primarily in the context of colonialism and the use of addiction as a tool to marginalize resistant populations (Singer, 2012), direct engagement with alcohol research did not gain momentum until the mid-20th century. This shift coincided with anthropology's growing commitment to addressing social problems and understanding the complexities of human behaviour (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006).

One of the seminal contributions to alcohol research in anthropology was Dwight Heath's ethnographic work among the Camba of eastern Bolivia in the 1950s (Heath, 1958). Heath challenged the pathological framing of alcohol use by demonstrating that drinking practices among the Camba were deeply entangled in their socio-cultural fabric, serving specific ritual and social functions rather than conforming to the disease model prevalent in biomedical discourse. This work laid the foundation for a broader anthropological perspective that views alcohol use as a culturally constructed phenomenon with diverse meanings and practices across societies (Heath, 1987).

Building on these critiques, sociologist Mariana Valverde (1998) further challenges the individualistic framing of alcohol consumption. She explores how liberal societies have historically constructed drinking through moral discourses of willpower, self-control, and personal failure. She argues that such moral frameworks portray alcohol misuse as an individual's moral failing and, in turn, obscures the broader socio-political and economic structures that shape drinking behaviours. This critique is particularly relevant in contexts where regulatory governance and public health policies frame alcohol use as a matter of personal discipline while ignoring the material and structural conditions that constrain individual agency. Valverde's work recognizes the need to interrogate cultural meanings and the moral and regulatory discourses that sustain simplistic narratives around alcohol consumption.

Over time, medical anthropology has expanded its scope from a narrow focus on emic understandings and subjective experiences to a more holistic approach that integrates micro-level experiences with macro-level structural forces such as politics, economics, and globalization (Singer, 2012). This evolution reflects a growing recognition of the need to address the complexities of alcohol use, particularly in light of rising substance use in Western societies and the limitations of generalized drug research. Ethnographic methods have been central to this endeavour, enabling anthropologists to explore the cultural nuances of drinking, conduct cross-cultural comparisons, and link individual experiences to broader socio-political and economic realities (Singer, 2012). For instance, historian Justin Willis's research in East Africa highlighted how colonial and post-colonial policies interacted with local brewing practices to reinforce power dynamics and social hierarchies (Willis, 2002). He discusses how colonial authorities criminalized indigenous brewing while promoting industrial alcohol controlled by European enterprises, thereby marginalizing African brewers, restructuring local economies, and establishing social stratifications that persisted into the post-colonial era.

Despite these contributions, the application of anthropological insights to address alcohol-related problems remains limited. Anthropologist Mac Marshall, in his work *Beliefs, Behaviours, and Alcoholic Beverages: A Cross-Cultural Survey*, argues that anthropology's primary contribution to alcohol research has been its emphasis on the socio-cultural dimensions of drinking, which challenges the dominance of biomedical and psychological perspectives (Marshall, 1979). However, this focus has also drawn criticism, with some scholars accusing anthropologists of downplaying the severity of alcohol-related harms by normalizing drinking practices (Room et al., 1984). In response, later research has underscored the personal and social consequences of excessive alcohol use, while also highlighting the role of structural factors such as poverty, inequality, and globalization in shaping drinking patterns (Singer, 2012; Spicer,

1997). Nevertheless, the integration of these insights into prevention, harm reduction, and treatment interventions has been slow, with policies often failing to reflect the socio-cultural complexities of alcohol use.

Current interventions for problematic drinking predominantly rely on individualized biomedical approaches that employ standardized screening tools and treatment models. These methods often overlook the diverse cultural meanings and experiences associated with intoxication, leading to a “one-size-fits-all” approach that may be ineffective or even counterproductive in different contexts (Rehm & Room, 2017; Thickett et al., 2013). Epidemiological categorizations frequently portray certain drinking behaviours as inherently pathological, generating simplistic distinctions between safe and harmful drinkers. Echoing Lorway and Khan’s (2014) critical analysis of epidemiological practices in HIV prevention, the reductionist frameworks currently guiding alcohol interventions in Kenya similarly engage in ‘making-up’ populations by categorizing youth drinking behaviours as pathological, rather than attending to the situated social and economic contexts producing these behaviours. Such categorizations neglect the intricate socio-economic dynamics that underpin drinking cultures, thus reducing complex realities to measurable behaviours divorced from the contexts in which they are embedded. Ethnographic research, therefore, offers a valuable alternative by capturing the intricate interplay of socio-material, discursive, and embodied factors that shape drinking practices. Such research is crucial for developing culturally sensitive policies and programs that address the multiple realities of problematic drinking.

Recent studies have further emphasized the need to bridge the gap between anthropological research and policy implementation. For example, research on alcohol use in Indigenous communities has highlighted the importance of incorporating local knowledge and practices into harm-reduction strategies (Brady, 2000). Similarly, studies on gender and alcohol

have revealed how power dynamics and cultural norms shape drinking practices, necessitating interventions that address these underlying factors (Eriksen, 1999). Despite these advances, a pressing need remains for more collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches that translate anthropological insights into actionable policies.

“Problematic Drinking” in Kenya

In Kenya, alcohol use and the broader drinking culture have predominantly been examined through a problem-focused lens, with much of the discourse centred on national drinking patterns at the macro level. This approach often overlooks the nuanced meanings and practices entwined in the diverse subcultures that characterize Kenya’s socio-cultural landscape (Chersich et al., 2007; Galárraga et al., 2017; Takahashi et al., 2017). As a result, there is a limited exploration of the localized realities and contextual factors that shape alcohol consumption, particularly within specific communities. While quantitative studies, often drawing from general population surveys and epidemiological data, dominate the field, they fail to capture the socio-cultural dimensions of alcohol use, which are critical for understanding its role in Kenyan society (Ndeti et al., 2009; Patel et al., 2020).

Historically, alcohol production and consumption in Kenya have been deeply intertwined with cultural practices, rituals, and symbolic meanings. For instance, among the Taita community in southern Kenya, alcohol has traditionally been used in rituals to mediate between individuals and their ancestors, particularly during times of illness or communal crises (Fortes & Harris, 1979; Willis, 2002). Such practices highlight the spiritual and communal significance of alcohol, which extends beyond mere consumption. However, these cultural dimensions are rarely acknowledged in national policy frameworks or government-led interventions, which tend to frame alcohol use primarily as a public health issue (Howland, 2016; NACADA, 2012). This

disconnect between cultural practices and policy approaches underscores the need for a more inclusive understanding of alcohol use that incorporates local perspectives and meanings.

Epidemiological data on alcohol use in Kenya, while valuable, are often limited in scope and representativeness. Most studies rely on small-scale surveys or selected populations, making it difficult to generalize findings to the broader Kenyan population (Jenkins et al., 2015; Lo et al., 2013; The Alcoholic Drinks Control ACT, 2010). Despite these limitations, existing research consistently points to high rates of problematic alcohol use, particularly among young people in low-income settings in Kenya (Gitatui et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2020; Takahashi et al., 2017). For example, a study in Western Kenya found that 7.3% of the population consumed alcohol, with 60.3% of these individuals classified as problem drinkers—defined as those who frequently become intoxicated (Lo et al., 2013). Similarly, a household survey in rural Kenya reported an alcohol use prevalence of 9.2%, with traditional brews being the most commonly consumed form of alcohol (Jenkins et al., 2015; Takahashi et al., 2017). These findings highlight the prevalence of unrecorded alcohol, which includes traditional and illicit brews, and its association with hazardous drinking patterns (Ferreira-Borges et al., 2016; Mkuu et al., 2018, 2019).

Unrecorded alcohol, which is often cheaper and has higher alcohol content than commercially produced beverages, is particularly prevalent in low-income areas. Its affordability and accessibility contribute to problematic drinking behaviours, as individuals are more likely to consume hazardous amounts (Lachenmeier et al., 2021; Papas et al., 2010). Moreover, the production and distribution of these brews are often unregulated, increasing the risk of contamination and alcohol-related harm (Mkuu et al., 2019; Takahashi et al., 2017). These factors draw attention to the need for targeted interventions that address the socio-economic and cultural drivers of unrecorded alcohol consumption.

Problematic drinking in Kenya has far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, and communities. Media reports frequently highlight cases of alcohol-related deaths, often linked to adulterated drinks, as well as the social and economic hardships faced by affected families (Howland, 2016; Willis, 2003). Despite these alarming trends, efforts to address problematic drinking have been largely ineffective, partly due to the lack of a holistic understanding of the issue. Current interventions often fail to account for the diverse cultural, economic, and social factors that shape alcohol use, resulting in fragmented and unsustainable solutions (NACADA, 2016; Patel et al., 2020). In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I focus on these diverse cultural, economic, and social factors. In doing so, I examine how problematic drinking is embedded within a complex web of meanings, practices, and structural conditions that go beyond individual consumption. I analyze the ways in which gender and age shape the enactment of drinking behaviours, highlighting how historically entrenched norms continue to influence who drinks, how, and under what conditions. This discussion extends to the shifting patterns of alcohol use among young people and the socio-cultural and economic forces that sustain these changes. Furthermore, I employ a political-economic semiotics approach to unpack the broader structural forces, including state regulation, economic inequalities, and global alcohol markets, that shape drinking cultures in Kenya. By situating problematic drinking within these intersecting realities, I argue that existing interventions fail to capture the multiplicity of forces that sustain alcohol use, often reducing it to a biomedical or behavioural problem. Instead, I propose an approach that considers the interwoven human and nonhuman actors that constitute problematic drinking as a dynamic and emergent social practice, but one that is also shaped by larger economic and political forces. This lens will allow for a more nuanced understanding of alcohol consumption, ultimately contributing to more contextually grounded policy responses and interventions.

Gender and Age in Problematic Drinking

This section conceptualizes gender beyond the binary categories of men and women to include non-binary identities. Researchers have widely examined gender as a key social factor in alcohol-related studies. Across cultures, distinct gendered processes shape the production, distribution, and consumption of alcohol. Men consistently report higher alcohol consumption and related harms than women (Patel et al., 2020). According to WHO's 2018 report on global alcohol and health, 43.6% of men drink alcohol compared to only 21% of women (WHO, 2018). The report also shows that men aged 15 and above consume an average of 23.1 liters of alcohol per capita, whereas women consume only 8.6 liters. Additionally, men engage in heavy episodic drinking at significantly higher rates (60.5%) than women (28.2%) (WHO, 2018). However, these statistics do not suggest that alcohol use among women is insignificant. In absolute numbers, more women consume alcohol as the global population increases (WHO, 2018).

Anthropologists have long associated gender disparities in alcohol consumption with identity-making and the construction of social categories and boundaries (Dietler, 2006). Historically, many cultures assigned alcohol use and intoxication distinct social meanings for men. In East African societies, for example, Willis (2002) documented how the Tswana community used beer drinking to reinforce senior men's dominance in social spaces. Similarly, among the Nyakyusa, men controlled the millet used for brewing, and women could only prepare alcohol for men to consume. Women were prohibited from drinking unless men permitted them (Willis, 2002). Many communities discouraged women from drinking due to beliefs that intoxicated women engaged in risky sexual behaviour (Willis, 2002).

Later studies in Kenyan urban centers revealed that men remained the dominant alcohol consumers, but women played a crucial role in alcohol production and trade. Women owned and operated most bars in informal economies, using alcohol businesses to sustain their families,

educate their children, and acquire property (Mutisya & Willis, 2009). Similarly, Howland found that among the Taita in southwestern Kenya, gender roles structured both alcohol production and consumption (Howland, 2016). Women primarily brewed and sold alcohol, while men occupied the drinking spaces. Although African women traditionally consumed little alcohol, recent trends indicate increasing rates of binge drinking and regular alcohol consumption among women (Martinez et al., 2011). Moreover, alcohol has empowered some women economically, as they control financial transactions within drinking spaces, creating a gendered flow of money from men to women (Helmfrid, 2010).

Researchers have also expressed concern over the growing prevalence of alcohol use among young people (Balding et al., 1997; Fraser et al., 2014; Pedersen & Skrondal, 2015). Studies have examined factors influencing drinking patterns (Fry, 2010; Heimisdottir et al., 2010; Lindsay, 2009; Measham & Brain, 2016) and the role of social and cultural norms in shaping youth drinking behaviours (Järvinen & Room, 2007). However, most studies in sub-Saharan Africa approach youth alcohol use from a public health perspective, focusing on drinking frequency, consumption quantity, and population-level risk factors (Gitatui et al., 2019; Kendagor et al., 2018). Few social science studies explore the underlying cultural and social drivers of alcohol use among young people in this region. The limited research available identifies factors such as alcohol outlet density, social norms, beverage availability, and affordability as key influences (Ibitoye et al., 2019; Kiene et al., 2017; Kuteesa et al., 2020; Letsela et al., 2019; Nwagu et al., 2017; Ransome et al., 2019).

In Kenya, researchers have documented mixed findings on the role of cultural norms in shaping youth alcohol use. A recent study on the socio-cultural determinants of alcohol abuse among youth in Western Kenya found that parental alcohol use, spousal drinking, and peer influence strongly contributed to youth drinking. The study also noted that cultural norms

generally discourage alcohol consumption among young people (Matara & Winga, 2021). However, other studies argue that cultural norms significantly enable youth drinking in Kenya (Keiwua, 2016; NACADA, 2007).

Despite increased research on gender and alcohol, few studies have considered non-binary and transgender populations, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Most studies on these populations focus on the Global North (Gilbert et al., 2018). Researchers have found that gender minority populations, including transgender, gender non-binary, and other gender non-conforming people (often all considered as transgender), experience high levels of stigma and discrimination, which contribute to alcohol use as a coping mechanism (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013). A systematic review revealed that transgender individuals have higher rates of hazardous drinking than cisgender individuals (Gilbert et al., 2018). Other studies show that transgender people are more than three times as likely as other genders to engage in high-risk alcohol consumption (Coulter et al., 2015; Day et al., 2017; Keuroghlian et al., 2015). Despite these findings, researchers have largely ignored gender minority populations in alcohol studies in sub-Saharan Africa⁴.

Masculinity norms also shape problematic drinking patterns, but researchers in Kenya have largely neglected this issue. Studies have shown that men who conform to dominant masculinity norms tend to consume alcohol at higher rates. In Kenya, a study on male teachers revealed that adherence to traditional masculine ideals strongly correlated with alcohol consumption (Wairimu et al., 2022). These findings align with global research indicating that men often use alcohol consumption to assert masculinity and social status (de Visser & Smith,

⁴ I do not have findings related to this aspect, because, while in the initial research design I had aimed to include an exploration of problem drinking among gender minorities, this was not feasible during fieldwork. There was heightened community tensions and the displacement of organizations supporting sexual minorities, which in turn limited safe and ethical engagement with this group.

2007). Examining how masculinity norms contribute to alcohol use in Kenya could provide valuable insights into the social drivers of problematic drinking.

Economic and structural factors further influence alcohol consumption. Low-income earners, particularly in informal settlements, consume unrecorded alcohol more frequently due to its affordability and accessibility (Gitatui et al., 2019). Researchers have linked unrecorded alcohol use to increased health risks and greater exposure to alcohol-related harms (Ferreira-Borges et al., 2017; Mkuu et al., 2018, 2019; Takahashi et al., 2017). Additionally, the intersection of gender and economic constraints creates unique alcohol consumption patterns. Women engaged in alcohol sales gain financial independence, yet remain reliant on alcohol-related income streams (Willis, 2002).

The gendered and age-related complexities of alcohol use show that drinking does not occur in isolation. Instead, multiple intersecting realities shape alcohol consumption. Examining these realities in Taita-Taveta requires a deeper investigation of the social, economic, and political factors sustaining problematic drinking.

The political economic semiotics of alcohol and drinking

Early anthropological research on alcohol use largely ignored the political and economic forces that shape drinking practices and their broader implications. In response, the political-economic approach emerged to critique this omission by analyzing alcohol use as a product of power relations, economic inequalities, and structural factors that sustain dominant institutions while marginalizing vulnerable populations (Hunt & Barker, 2001; Singer, 1986b). Merrill Singer, a medical anthropologist, expanded this approach, arguing that understanding alcohol consumption requires moving beyond biomedical explanations to consider the structural conditions that enable and sustain heavy drinking (Singer, 1986a). Citing Baer, Singer defines

the political-economy approach as “a critical endeavour which attempts to understand health-related issues within the context of the class and imperialist relations inherent in the capitalist world-system” (Baer, 1982; Singer, 1986a, p.116).

This approach remains highly relevant today, as powerful alcohol industry actors actively influence policy decisions and economic structures to maintain market dominance. Recent research highlights how alcohol corporations shape national policies to weaken regulation while promoting consumption, particularly in emerging economies like Kenya (Marten et al., 2020; Walls et al., 2020). By embedding alcohol in economic and political networks, these industry strategies sustain problematic drinking while shifting the focus away from structural interventions.

Building on Engels’s insights, Singer emphasizes the need to analyze alcohol use as a tool of social and economic control, particularly among marginalized populations (Singer, 1986a). Employers and state actors have historically used alcohol to discipline labor forces, promote docility, and sustain exploitative work conditions, particularly in colonial and post-colonial economies (Hunt & Barker, 2001). For example, research on Kenya’s plantation economy shows that alcohol was systematically supplied to workers as an incentive while simultaneously reinforcing their economic dependence on employers (Willis, 2002). Recent studies further highlight how the expansion of the alcohol market in low-income areas entrenches structural inequalities by perpetuating cycles of debt and economic precarity (Ferreira-Borges et al., 2016; Mkuu et al., 2019).

Additionally, global alcohol industry players actively exploit economic vulnerabilities by targeting low-income consumers through aggressive marketing and low-cost, high-alcohol-content products (Jernigan, 2009; Marten et al., 2020). These industry strategies reinforce patterns of heavy drinking while extracting economic value from marginalized communities. The

informal alcohol economy also plays a critical role in sustaining power imbalances. Studies on illicit alcohol markets in Kenyan slums reveal that unregulated alcohol production thrives due to economic desperation and weak governance structures (Gitatui et al., 2019). However, rather than addressing these root causes, authorities frequently target small-scale brewers—often women—while more powerful players in the alcohol industry evade regulation through political connections (Willis, 2002).

Recent anthropological analyses have further illustrated the necessity of examining substance use not merely as individual or behavioural problems, but as practices deeply entangled within broader structural inequalities, governance failures, and economic precarity. For example, Fast's ethnographic work on youth substance use in Vancouver demonstrates how problematic substance use arises within larger structural contexts of poverty, neoliberal governance, and systemic neglect (Fast, 2023). Fast argues that focusing only on individual behaviours neglects the deeper entanglements of structural inequalities such as poverty, inadequate care infrastructures, and regulatory contradictions that sustain problematic substance use (Fast, 2023). This perspective applies to examining problematic drinking practices among young people in Taita-Taveta, which are similarly embedded within precarious socio-economic contexts, ineffective governance, and regulatory evasion, stressing the urgent need for policies addressing these structural dimensions.

The political-economic semiotics of alcohol also reveals how profit-driven individuals and institutions construct and sustain problematic drinking at both local and global levels. Alcohol corporations strategically manipulate national policies by lobbying against regulatory measures that threaten their profits, such as higher taxation, marketing restrictions, and sales limitations (Jernigan, 2009; Marten et al., 2020). Research on Kenya's alcohol policy landscape illustrates how industry actors influence governance structures by forging relationships with

policymakers, thereby weakening enforcement mechanisms and creating regulatory loopholes that favor corporate interests (Walls et al., 2020).

One clear example is the Brewers' Association campaign in post-independence Kenya. During this period, industry players lobbied the government to impose restrictive regulations on traditional alcohol producers, arguing that unregulated brews resulted in tax revenue losses (Willis, 2002). These efforts disproportionately benefited large-scale commercial brewers while marginalizing small-scale, often female, alcohol entrepreneurs. Similar dynamics persist today, where powerful industry actors continue to shape regulations that prioritize economic gains over public health concerns (Mkuu et al., 2019).

The structural and economic dimensions of alcohol control further illustrate the persistence of inequalities in the Kenyan alcohol landscape. In 2010, the Kenyan government legalized the production and sale of some traditional brews under a regulatory framework meant to reduce harms associated with illicit alcohol. However, the implementation of this law remains inconsistent, with small-scale brewers facing frequent harassment and demands for bribes from law enforcement officials (Haugerud, 1995). Meanwhile, large alcohol companies continue to dominate the market, maintaining their influence over pricing, supply chains, and advertising strategies. The media also plays a critical role in shaping public discourse around alcohol, often reinforcing state narratives that criminalize informal alcohol production while protecting corporate interests (Marten et al., 2020).

Research further highlights the role of consumerism in shaping alcohol use, both at the local and global levels. Alcohol companies strategically market alcohol as a marker of modernity, success, and masculinity, particularly among youth populations in Africa (Marten et al., 2020; Walls et al., 2020). Studies show that targeted alcohol advertisements disproportionately reach low-income and rural communities, reinforcing alcohol dependence

while generating profits for multinational corporations (Jernigan, 2009). This exploitation of economic vulnerabilities—through the normalization of heavy drinking in culturally tailored marketing campaigns illustrates how industry actors actively construct drinking cultures to sustain their market dominance (Mkuu et al., 2019).

These discussions reveal that problematic drinking does not stem from individual behaviours alone, but from politically and economically orchestrated conditions that sustain excessive alcohol consumption. Despite growing evidence on the structural drivers of alcohol-related harm, policymakers in Kenya continue to prioritize individual behaviour change strategies while neglecting broader regulatory and economic reforms (Ferreira-Borges et al., 2016; White et al., 2016).

Without stronger policy interventions, including stricter regulation of industry influence, enforcement of alcohol taxation laws, and protections for small-scale brewers, Kenya's alcohol landscape will remain shaped by corporate interests rather than public health imperatives. Therefore, when complemented with political economy, the material semiotics approach offers a useful framework to trace how corporate and regulatory actors, materials, and practices are entangled while also situating these entanglements within larger political and economic systems. Understanding alcohol's role within these intersecting structures—rather than isolating it as an individual problem—remains critical for designing sustainable harm-reduction strategies that address both systemic inequalities and localized socio-material dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

“... knowing humans and nonhumans on similar terms is useful because it opens up empirical questions about which ‘actors’ are doing what to which other ‘actors’, with what effects.” (Law, 2019; p. 4)

Material semiotics

Public health framing of problematic drinking is that of a single reality, presenting alcohol as this psychoactive agent that, when ingested (“in excess”), causes harm. However, it is possible to argue that drinking practices are woven into different aspects of people’s daily lives, with each web enacting different realities that are also overlapping. Alcohol, in itself as a form of materiality, has a multiplicity of different social realities that are interwoven within production, distribution, and consumption to produce or affect what we refer to as “problematic drinking” in public health (Law, 1999). Different realities that overlap are central to material semiotics, which is a set of tools or approaches to research that cut across a wide range of disciplines to understand practices and actors and their interconnectedness or entanglements within and between the social and the natural worlds, and how those collectively ‘work’ to shape different realities (Law, 2019). Materials semiotics, therefore, which is closely associated with French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (Latour, 1996), is an approach that is emerging in social sciences but popular in science and technology studies, where it has been used to investigate and understand the “socio-technical landscape” of different technologies. For instance, Marianne de Laet and Annemarie Mol write about *the Zimbabwe Bush Pump “B” Type*. In their analysis, they show that this pump has many parts that are entwined (both visible and invisible) and collaborate with many other actors to work to provide local communities with not only ‘pure, fresh, clean water’ (p.231), but also many other functions including identity (De Laet & Mol, 2000). The Zimbabwe Bush Pump analysis is a demonstration of how material semiotics act to challenge the ontological assumptions of single realities to look at a phenomenon as made up of a multiplicity of interconnected and fluid realities produced through everyday practices (Law, 1992).

Material semiotics is centred around three main ideas: semiotic relationality (it is a network whose elements define and shape one another), nonhuman agency (there are plenty of other things, not just the social), and heterogeneity (there are different kinds of actors involved in enacting a reality; human and nonhuman) (Callon & Law, 1995; Law, 2007). In relation to the nonhuman principle of material semiotics (which often is not considered in understanding social realities), scholars have argued that materials have power to produce otherness in the world as a level of their qualities (Bennett, 2004; Bryant, 2013); that is, making modifications or changes in the world. This is in recognition that we live in a world that is materially diverse and heterogeneous (Law & Singleton, 2014). Thus, the focus here is on establishing how different heterogeneous elements assemble and enact a set of practices that make a more or less precarious reality.

Material Semiotics and Problematic Drinking

Problematic drinking is a precarious reality⁵ that requires the availability of alcohol as a “thing” holding at the center and enacted by a wider network of actors who are both human and nonhuman. According to Ingold, he describes a “thing” as “a *going on* or a place where several *goings on* becomes entwined.” He uses an example of a tree and how things like algae grow on the surface of a tree trunk and other inhabitants, like the birds that build their nests on it (Ingold, 2010; p.4). A reality, on the other hand, is a weave of things (both human and nonhuman) that, within a chain of interdependence, constantly exert agency on each other in an endless process of transformation (Hodder, 2011). Thus, in asking how alcohol as a thing acts and what it does within the context of problematic drinking, we can situate alcohol’s place in this weave by noting

⁵ In many instances in this dissertation, I present problem drinking as a precarious reality to emphasize its vulnerability from the perspective of individuals experiencing ‘problem drinking’ and the moral and cultural ambiguity where it exists in – accepted in some contexts while condemned in others.

how scholars have explored its varied roles: alcohol has been associated with making food and drinking practices in some cultures (Gately, 2008; Hammer & Vallianatos, 2019), causing social and health harms, building community and social identities, inducing economic development (or lack of it), propagating (and sometimes repressing) power and authority, among other actions. Nevertheless, few analyses detail how other actants—distribution channels, regulations, drinking spaces, and production technologies—collaborate to co-produce conditions that public health actors ultimately define as problematic. My dissertation research sought to fill that gap by systematically examining these material-semiotic entanglements in Taita-Taveta.

I approached the notion of “problematic drinking” as more than a constructed idea or a fixed biological reality. Instead, I viewed it in terms of its multiplicitious realities that coalesce around human and nonhuman actants (Law, 2008). There are numerous connected actors involved in shaping and enacting problematic drinking, where every actor has the capacity to affect and be affected. Problematic drinking, therefore, cannot be understood without exploring all participating actors, including nonhumans, because both humans and nonhumans are considered at the same level of significance to affect and be affected within the complex connections of actors (Law, 2008). In Taita-Taveta, as I will discuss in the findings, I found that each actor in this network—whether a bar owner, a policy document, a type of local brew, or a piece of distillation equipment—exerted a tangible effect. Each actor also felt the effects of other actants, in turn producing a network and flow of influences that shape what communities identify as “problematic.” By drawing on Latour’s (2005) argument about the symmetrical distribution of agency, in the present, I build on this to highlight how objects (like alcohol containers or drinking area setups) can sustain or discourage certain practices depending on how they fit into local norms and logistical constraints. Nevertheless, I am also aware of the critique around the under-theorizing of structural powers in the symmetrical distribution of agency. Therefore, I

incorporate a political economic framework for a more rigorous methodology to examine how interactions between actors take shape within larger economic, social, and political forces that produce problem drinking.

Multiple Realities and Their Overlaps

Material semiotics prompts researchers to explore how different “realities” intersect in daily life. In the Taita-Taveta context, my dissertation shows that what counts as excessive drinking, ceremonial drinking, or medically urgent drinking varies depending on the local vantage point and the connections that make certain behaviours possible. By mapping those connections ethnographically, I identify many overlapping systems that shape the dynamics of alcohol consumption and regulation. For example, local law enforcers who ideally enforce alcohol regulations, often become entangled in complex networks involving bar owners, who might offer informal incentives or maintain social relationships with them to avoid inspection. These relationships are then further shaped by the temporal dynamics of evening gatherings, where alcohol consumption peaks, and regulatory oversight is likely to be less visible or is more negotiable. Moreover, the chemical properties of alcohol itself, which can lower inhibitions and foster social bonding, play an active role in reinforcing these networks, influencing behaviours and decisions within these gatherings. Together, these interconnected elements (the social relationships, temporal rhythms, regulatory practices, and material properties), constitute an overlapping system that complicates straightforward enforcement and shapes the social life of alcohol in ways that exceed formal policy structures.

It is important to note that these fluid arrangements sometimes resonate with concerns about official health and social order. Still, they also generate parallel meanings whereby, in some settings, alcohol consumption fosters relational ties or attends to community rites, even if it

risks harmful health consequences. In other settings, the presence (or absence) of a specific brew shapes the daily economy and influences who qualifies as “deserving” of credit or social trust. These findings align with Law and Singleton’s argument that the material world is diverse and that we need to attend to objects’ capacities to form attachments that vary across contexts (Law & Singleton, 2014).

Ethnographic Engagement with Material Semiotics

In this dissertation, I employ material semiotics tenets through ethnography, allowing me to track how everyday practices unfold in real-time. Rather than treat “problematic drinking” as a phenomenon residing solely in the minds or bodies of individuals, I analyze how it travels through networks of references, objects, and discourses. I observed how local brewers negotiate with informal authorities or how the design of drinking dens affects the frequency and pattern of alcohol intake. I also examined how official policies, signage, and law enforcement actions shape the environment in which drinking takes place.

These observations reveal that each actor—be it a piece of equipment, a bylaw, a local custom, or a user’s body—operates through relational processes. I pay close attention to how participants describe the different drinks, the perceived roles of male and female drinkers, and the broader stigma or prestige assigned to particular beverages. Such relational mapping provides insights into how precarious “problematic drinking” can be, emphasizing both the vulnerability of individuals experiencing problem drinking and the moral and cultural ambiguity surrounding it (where drinking is accepted in some contexts while condemned in others). This precarious reality reflects how easily problem drinking can shift according to localized rules, everyday patterns, and material conditions. Besides, I also adopt a broader view to examine how these relational processes are entangled with macrostructural forces, such as regulatory frameworks,

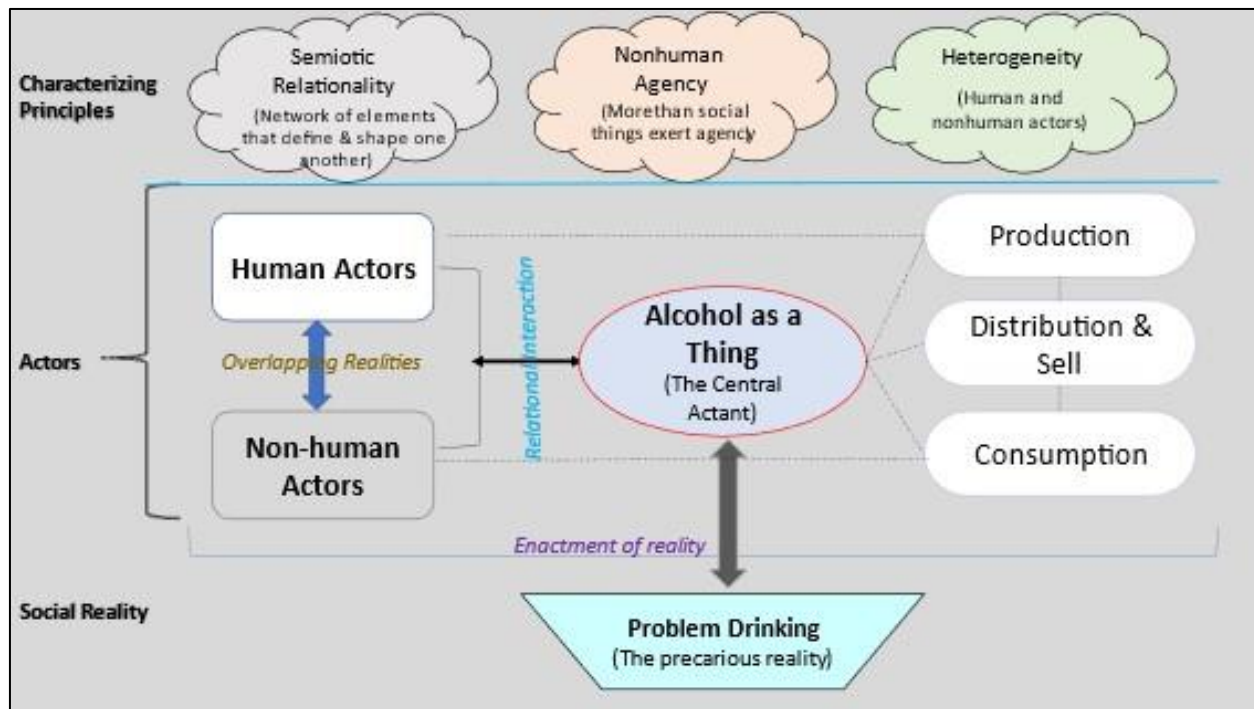
economic pressures, and social hierarchies, which together produce and sustain problem drinking as an unstable and context-dependent reality.

Implications for Interventions

By applying this material semiotics lens, my study adds depth to existing public health perspectives that treat problematic drinking as a one-dimensional issue. Recognizing multiple overlapping realities helps stakeholders craft interventions that resonate with local knowledge and constraints. Because no single actor or linear chain of cause-effect fully explains excessive consumption, we need strategies that accommodate a networked understanding. For example, addressing how production equipment is regulated or marketed might have as much impact on risky drinking patterns as do clinical treatments for alcohol-related diseases.

Moreover, this approach reorients the question from, “How do we stop people from consuming harmful amounts of alcohol?” to, “Which socio-material connections support current drinking patterns, and how might we rearrange them?” By seeing alcohol not only as a psychoactive substance but also as a social, cultural, and material actant, we gain fresh perspectives on how to realign its place in both local and global networks. Material semiotics thus opens up possibilities for more sensitive interventions, where policymakers and community members cooperate to reconfigure the conditions under which problematic drinking flourishes.

Figure 2: Diagrammatic Representation of Material Semiotics Framework for Examining Problematic Drinking.



CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

The following fieldnote, recorded in early November 2024 during an observation in a drinking space in Bura, located in the Taita Hills, approximately 13 Kilometers northwest of Mwatate, illustrates the complex methodological and ethical challenges that emerged while conducting alcohol-related ethnographic research in my home community. This narrative reflects three key dimensions of my research experience: 1) the paradoxes of conducting ethnography “at home,” 2) the gendered dynamics of being a female researcher in ordinarily male-dominated drinking spaces, and 3) the broader methodological and ethical dilemmas involved in studying alcohol consumption in spaces characterized by surveillance, suspicion, and intermittent violence. These dynamics significantly shaped my fieldwork and required constant negotiation of my role as a researcher.

Manga (a pseudonym)⁶ is the one selling Mnazi today, though I hear she also owns a Mbangara drinking joint elsewhere. She is a young lady, perhaps in her mid-20s. But she is not just selling—she is drinking too, shifting between Mnazi and Mbangara. By the time she and her companions return to this drinking space (having left earlier when word spread that I might be a government informant), she is already heavily intoxicated. Reassured now that I have no hidden agenda, she becomes more uninhibited. Her drinking escalates into shouting, her words turning abusive and confrontational. The tension spreads quickly. Another woman rises to challenge her, accusing her of insulting customers despite being a seller herself. The confrontation intensifies, drawing attention from those around. Sensing the shift, Mwadime, one of the still-sober patrons, pulls my arm and signals that we should step away. We move to the Mbangara room, which is quieter, at least for now. Soon, a few others join us: an older man and a younger patron. Mwadime mutters that he dislikes chaotic environments and avoids trouble whenever possible. His actions reflect an unspoken rule among some patrons—conflict is best avoided rather than confronted directly. Nevertheless, the shouting follows us. The two women burst into the room, still arguing. Without hesitation, Mwadime exits. I attempt to intervene, hoping to de-escalate the situation, but neither woman will be calmed. Eventually, the pub owner steps in, speaking with authority. She manages to retain most of her customers, though a few leave, unwilling to remain in the tense atmosphere. I, too,

⁶ All participant names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

decided to shift spaces, moving to the Mnazi section where Mghoi, another seller, gestured that it was more settled. For a while, this seems true. Then, Manga reappears, this time in tears. Her earlier aggression has dissolved into raw emotion. Mary, a seller from another Mbangara joint, leans in to explain: “This is not just alcohol. She takes other things, too.” I remain where I am, observing, unsure how to interpret the scene before me. Then, an unexpected interruption: a man in Maasai attire calls for me. I hesitate, unsure why, as I have had no prior interactions with him. Still, I approach. His intent becomes clear immediately—he assumes I am here looking for hookups. He offers KES 2000 [~ \$16 USD] and suggests he can add more later, telling me not to focus on his appearance or cultural markers, just the money. When I refuse, his conduct shifts instantly, anger flaring. For a moment, it feels like he might strike me. I keep my composure, quietly stepping away from the confrontation. By now, I am irritated but force myself to remain calm. I return to the Mnazi room, where the atmosphere has settled once again. Manga, now calmed, clings to her partner. Her aggression has dissipated, but her eyes remain swollen from crying—traces of the turmoil that has unfolded over the evening. [Thursday, November 16, 2023, Mbangara & Mnazi joints]

This field encounter illustrates the complex positionalities I had to navigate throughout my research. My experience highlights three critical methodological and ethical issues:

Ethnography “at Home”: Familiarity and Its Limits

Conducting research in a place I call home initially gave me a sense of confidence. I assumed that my cultural and linguistic familiarity would make it easier to interact with people and gain access to key spaces. However, I quickly realized that my prior experiences did not extend to the drinking spaces where my research mainly unfolded, because familiarity with a place does not necessarily mean familiarity with all its subcultures. While I am Taita ⁷ and “know the area well,” I realized my connections were formed in different social settings and not in the world of *Mnazi*, *Mbangara* or any other alcohol-drinking spaces for that matter. This meant I had to navigate suspicions, build new forms of trust, and negotiate access in ways I had not anticipated. The assumption that home is always a “safe” and “accessible” research site is, therefore, debatable as the nature of research has a significant influence in the end. Hence, it

⁷ “Taita” refers to both a place in southeastern Kenya, and an ethnic group.

requires critical interrogation: see (Bilgen & Fábos, 2024; Colic-Peisker, 2004; C. R. A. Nordstrom, 1995).

Navigating the Drinking Space as a Female Researcher

As a female researcher in a largely male-dominated drinking environment, I faced gendered vulnerabilities that shaped my interactions. The misperception that I was a transactional sex worker was particularly troubling, posing not only a moral dilemma but also real safety concerns. My presence as an unattached woman in these spaces made me an object of speculation and, at times, direct propositioning, as the encounter with the Maasai man demonstrates. Such interactions required constant negotiation to maintain my research focus and ensure my safety and that of my research assistants, where applicable. The gendered nature of access in ethnographic research is well-documented: see (Bell et al., 2013; Evans, 2017; Geschiere & Goheen, 2001; Johnson, 2018; Matthews et al., 1990). However, my experience highlights the particular ways in which alcohol-related research amplifies these vulnerabilities.

Ethical and Practical Dilemmas of Studying Alcohol Use in Informal Drinking Spaces

Researching drinking spaces presents a unique set of ethical and methodological challenges. These are environments marked by fluctuating states of sobriety and intoxication, rapidly shifting social dynamics, and occasional violence. Consent is not a straightforward process in such contexts, with reflexive questions such as: At what point does participation become coercion when people are under the influence? How does one balance the need for immersion with ethical considerations of safety and non-intervention? Additionally, the illegality of some aspects of these drinking spaces means that participants are often wary of outsiders, making trust-building even more difficult. These issues required me to constantly reflect on my

presence in the field, ensuring that my role as a researcher did not compromise either our safety or the ethical obligations to my participants.

Beyond Methods: A Critical Approach to Methodology

Methodology extends beyond a set of tools for data collection; it encompasses the entire epistemological, ethical, and reflexive process of research. As Guba and Lincoln (2000) argue, methodology is deeply embedded in power, subjectivity, and representation questions. These considerations shaped my research design, engagement with participants, data collection strategies, and analytical approach.

In the following sections, I outline the methodological framework of my study, including research design, participant recruitment, data collection methods, data analysis, and all the ethical considerations I applied for my study. Following this, I engage more deeply with the specific challenges of conducting alcohol-related research as a female ethnographer in a home environment. My goal is not to prescribe a universal methodological template for home-based alcohol ethnographies but rather to contribute to critical discussions on the ethical and methodological negotiations required in such research settings. By foregrounding these challenges, I hope to provide insights for future researchers, equipping them with a deeper understanding of the complexities they may encounter in similar contexts.

The Home Paradox and Insider-Outsider Identities

I hail from Taita-Taveta County, specifically Mwanda in Taita Sub-County, one of the four administrative units constituting the county. This is the place of my birth, my upbringing, and my sense of belonging, what I unequivocally call home. As a Taita, my connection to this study is deeply personal. The research originates from my lived experiences, shaped both by childhood observations and later professional encounters. I remember that, growing up, my

mother often used the metaphor *Chofi kidondaagha*, a Taita phrase that literally translates to “alcohol does not bring development.” However, the phrase functions as more than a literal warning, where it also captures a moral stance on the perceived stagnation that alcohol consumption produces in one’s life trajectory. I may not have fully grasped its significance at the time, but as I grew older, I saw the metaphor materialize in the lives of people known to me.

I witnessed acquaintances and family members struggle with alcohol dependency, saw careers crumble, families locked in cycles of domestic violence, and children forced to miss out on education as fathers succumbed to what seemed like an unavoidable entanglement with alcohol. In my community, alcohol-related deaths and injuries were not abstract statistics; they were names and faces; people who fell from cliffs that form the striking landscape of my homeland or who succumbed to suicide or the physiological toll of excessive drinking. The persistence of this phenomenon, this daily and problematic drinking, became a puzzle that I longed to understand. I wanted to know what social, economic, and historical factors sustain such patterns of alcohol use. If the drivers were well understood, could they inform sustainable interventions?

My professional journey in HIV research expanded this inquiry. Research has consistently established alcohol consumption as a significant risk factor for HIV acquisition and transmission (Chersich et al., 2014; Kiene et al., 2019; Rehm et al., 2017; Woolf-King et al., 2018). As a matter of fact, a research group that I worked with, for instance, found that disordered alcohol use was a significant risk factor for loss to follow-up for a cohort of men who have sex with men who were initiated on PrEP at a research clinic at the Kenyan Coast (Wahome et al., 2020). These realizations added another layer of urgency to my inquiry, taking note that beyond the visibly devastating effects of alcohol on individual lives and familial structures, there were broader public health implications that demanded attention. However, my curiosity was

further piqued by a recurring discourse in social interactions outside Taita-Taveta. Whenever I introduced myself as Taita, a typical response followed: “*Oh, so you are Taita? The people who love drinking excessively?*” This seemingly casual remark signalled something deeper—why was drinking so closely associated with Taita’s identity? What historical, structural, and cultural processes contribute to this characterization? More crucially, was the drinking in Taita-Taveta truly problematic in the way it was portrayed, or was it a complex phenomenon requiring immersed ethnographic interrogation?

I embarked on this study from this position of inquiry—seeking to critically engage with the dynamics that sustain the drinking culture in Taita-Taveta and interrogate the frameworks within which problem drinking is understood and represented. From the outset, I was acutely aware of my positionality: I am an *insider*, deeply embedded in the social fabric of Taita-Taveta. However, I am simultaneously an outsider whereby my personal distance from habitual drinking and the drinking subcultures within the county introduces a layer of detachment (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This duality of insider-outsider positionality (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Mullings, 1999) is not merely a methodological consideration but an epistemological one. It compels me to navigate the research field with reflexivity, acknowledging how my subjectivities shape the questions I ask, my interactions, and the interpretations I draw.

Hammersley and Atkinson define an insider researcher as someone who shares a cultural, social, or professional identity with the community under study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Conversely, an outsider is positioned as an external observer, someone who does not necessarily share these identities. However, they caution that this distinction is rarely clear-cut; rather, researchers often occupy a fluid positionality, moving between insider and outsider roles depending on context. This dynamic informs my own positionality in this study. As a member of the Taita community, with deep personal and cultural ties to the region, I enter this research as an

insider. However, my relative distance from the drinking subculture under examination simultaneously places me in the position of an outsider. This dual positionality is not merely a methodological challenge but an epistemological consideration that shapes the knowledge produced through this research.

The negotiation of insider-outsider identity is not unique to my study but is well-documented in scholarship on alcohol use and substance-related ethnographies. Classic and contemporary studies illustrate how researchers have had to navigate this dual identity in ways that enrich both their methodological approach and analytical insights.

For instance, Heath (2000) draws on decades of ethnographic research on drinking cultures in Bolivia among the Camba people, as well as in other societies, to illustrate how alcohol consumption is deeply embedded within social and cultural structures. While his extended stay in these communities allowed him to function as an insider, participating in drinking rituals and social practices, he simultaneously maintained his outsider status as an ethnographic observer and analyst. His work demonstrates how sustained immersion in the field does not erase the researcher's positionality but rather makes it a tool for deeper understanding.

A more contemporary example is García's *The Pastoral Clinic*, which examines addiction and substance use within Hispanic communities in the Rio Grande Valley (Garcia, 2010). Although García's study extends beyond alcohol consumption to include other forms of substance dependence, her work critically engages with the ways drinking practices intersect with trauma, poverty, and cultural identity. As a researcher with familial and cultural ties to the community she studies, García occupies the role of an insider. However, as an academic anthropologist investigating the structural and historical dimensions of addiction, she simultaneously operates as an outsider. Her ethnography underscores how being both embedded in and analytically distanced from one's research community can generate critical insights that

might be less accessible to a purely external researcher. These examples illustrate that the duality of being both an insider and an outsider in alcohol-related research is neither uncommon nor necessarily problematic. Instead, it is an epistemological stance that must be actively engaged with throughout the research process.

One of the primary reasons I chose a dual insider-outsider research stance is my deep-rooted connection to the Taita-Taveta community. As a Taita, I have an intrinsic understanding of the social fabric, cultural logics, and lived realities of the people I study. This connection provides access and an ethical and intellectual imperative to engage with issues that directly affect my community. My decision to undertake this research is not merely an academic exercise; it is both a personal commitment and an act of social responsibility. Alcohol use, particularly problem drinking among young people, is not just an individual concern but a phenomenon with far-reaching socio-economic, political, and public health implications. The obligation to contribute to a nuanced understanding of this issue and to engage with its broader structural determinants is what drove my research engagement.

This reasoning resonates with García's reflections in *The Pastoral Clinic*, where she discusses how her research in northern New Mexico was motivated by a desire to understand the struggles of her own family and community (Garcia, 2010). García illustrates how addiction and intergenerational trauma are deeply embedded in local histories and social structures, and she argues that her personal connection lends authenticity and emotional depth to her ethnographic work. Similarly, my engagement with alcohol use in Taita-Taveta is shaped by an awareness of both personal and collective histories, ensuring that my research is not detached from the realities it seeks to illuminate.

Beyond my commitment to community engagement, the other reason for my dual positionality as an insider and an outsider is that it offers a methodological advantage that

enhances this study's depth and critical rigor. Merton (1972) and Herzfeld (2014) argue that researchers occupying both insider and outsider positions benefit from a unique epistemological advantage; one that combines an insider's cultural intimacy with an outsider's analytical distance. This positionality enables access to implicit knowledge, practices, and social norms while allowing for a level of critical detachment necessary for scholarly interpretation.

In the context of this study, my dual identity allowed me to navigate two intertwined yet distinct spaces: the broader Taita community, of which I am a member, and the drinking subcultures, within which I am an outsider. My connectedness within the Taita community gave me a deep understanding of local meanings and discourses surrounding alcohol use, while my relative distance from habitual drinking and the informal alcohol economy positioned me as an external observer. This dual perspective facilitated a more nuanced exploration of the broader social, economic, and political dimensions of problem drinking among young people in Taita-Taveta, moving beyond pathologizing narratives to consider how structural conditions shape alcohol consumption patterns.

However, as earlier noted, this positionality did not alienate me from experiencing a share of distinct methodological and ethical challenges. Conducting ethnographic research in male-dominated drinking spaces and, in several instances, within the informal alcohol economy—an industry that operates under conditions of legal precarity and criminalization—compounded the complexities of my fieldwork. In the following sections of this chapter, therefore, I will elaborate on the research design, methodological choices, and fieldwork processes I undertook in this study. In doing so, I aim to weave together my experiences of positionality and reflexivity, critically reflecting on the ways in which my dual identity shaped—and was shaped by—the research encounter.

Multi-Sited Ethnography Study Design

My study utilizes multi-sited ethnography as its primary methodological approach. Unlike traditional ethnographic research, which typically focuses on a singular, bounded community, multi-sited ethnography moves across multiple interconnected sites to trace social phenomena as they unfold in different spaces (Marcus, 1995). This approach allows for an examination of how alcohol use among young people in Taita-Taveta is not confined to one physical location but is shaped by overlapping social, economic, and political structures and realities that extend beyond the localized context.

As a methodological approach in anthropology, multi-sited ethnography emerged as a response to the increasing recognition that many contemporary social phenomena—such as migration, transnationalism, and digital networks—cannot be adequately understood within a single geographic or cultural context (Falzon, 2009; Hage, 2005). Marcus (1995) formally articulated this approach in his seminal work, *Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography*, where he critiqued traditional ethnographic methods for their emphasis on bounded, localized cultures. He argued that growing global interconnectivity necessitated a shift in ethnographic research to follow people, objects, discourses, and institutions as they move across multiple sites.

Drawing from world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 2011), transnationalism (Schiller, 2012), actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), and critical globalization studies (Tsing, 2005), multi-sited ethnography examines how social processes and realities are constituted across different locations. Marcus (1995) identified several key methodological strategies for conducting multi-sited ethnography research, including “following the phenomenon”, which involves tracing people, objects, discourses, or practices across different sites to examine how they are embedded within broader systems. However, this approach has faced criticism. Some

scholars argue that multi-sited ethnography risks sacrificing depth for breadth since researchers must distribute their time across multiple locations rather than immersing themselves deeply in a single setting (Candea, 2007). Others highlight the potential for fragmentation, as collecting and synthesizing data across diverse sites poses challenges in constructing a coherent ethnographic narrative (Hage, 2005). Despite these concerns, multi-sited ethnography represents a crucial methodological shift that enables researchers to capture the complexity of contemporary social worlds (Falzon, 2009).

In medical anthropology, multi-sited ethnography has facilitated the study of health-related phenomena across diverse and interconnected locales (Singer & Baer, 2018). This approach enables researchers to examine how global flows of people, medical technologies, and health policies shape localized experiences of illness and care (Whyte et al., 2002). One well-known example is Nancy Scheper-Hughes' (2000) research on the global organ trade. She conducted a multi-sited ethnographic study spanning Brazil, South Africa, Moldova, Israel, and the United States, where she investigated the clandestine networks of organ trafficking. By engaging with donors, recipients, brokers, and medical professionals across these regions, Scheper-Hughes exposed the ethical dilemmas and human rights violations inherent in the commodification of human bodies. The other example is the work of anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2015) in *Epistemology, fieldwork, and anthropology*, where he highlights how economic inequalities and disparities in health governance are produced in West Africa, particularly in Niger, Mali, and Benin. His work examines the interactions between healthcare providers and patients, the implementation of health policies, and the informal practices that shape healthcare systems. By studying multiple sites—including urban hospitals, rural clinics, and community health initiatives—Olivier de Sardan demonstrates how local norms and informal practices influence the effectiveness of official health interventions.

Within the field of alcohol studies, Aaron Charles Hart (2016) has conducted a multi-sited ethnographic study on heavy sessional drinking among young adults in Australia. His research moves across urban drinking spaces, policy-making institutions, and harm reduction services to understand how socio-economic factors, regulatory frameworks, and cultural norms shape alcohol consumption. Hart's work challenges traditional epidemiological approaches, highlighting the structural determinants of alcohol-related harm rather than focusing solely on individual behaviour (Hart, 2016).

In the context of my research, adopting a multi-sited lens is essential for capturing the complexity of problem drinking among young people in Taita-Taveta. Alcohol consumption does not occur in isolation but unfolds within multiple and overlapping spheres, including 1) Rural villages and urban centers where social drinking practices differ across class and economic backgrounds, 2) informal alcohol brewing sites, where illicit production, drinking and distribution take place, 3) drinking dens, both formal and informal, where young people engage in heavy drinking, 4) healthcare facilities, where the consequences of alcohol-related harm are managed, 5) law enforcement institutions, where the criminalization of informal alcohol economies and defying of regulations play out, and 6) digital spaces, where discourses on alcohol use, masculinity, and social identity are shaped and contested. This methodological approach, therefore, allows for examining how alcohol use is embedded within historical, economic, and social structures and how it is mediated by mobility, policy, and local-global interactions.

My decision to conduct a multi-sited ethnographic study, moving beyond Latour's Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) towards a more critical application of the framework, is also informed by Merril Singer and Hans Baer's (2018) critical medical anthropology and Paul Farmer's (2004) theory of structural violence. Both frameworks emphasize that health-related

behaviours, including alcohol use, must be understood within broader political, economic, and historical conditions rather than reduced to individual pathology. Additionally, this study draws from the anthropology of mobility and translocality (Appadurai, 1996; Schiller, 2012), recognizing that social practices, including those that make-up drinking cultures, are shaped by trans-local flows of people, commodities, and discourses. This theoretical orientation is particularly relevant given the rural-urban mobility of young drinkers in Taita-Taveta, the circulation of informal alcohol commodities across economic networks, and the influence of national and transnational discourses on alcohol regulation and drinking cultures.

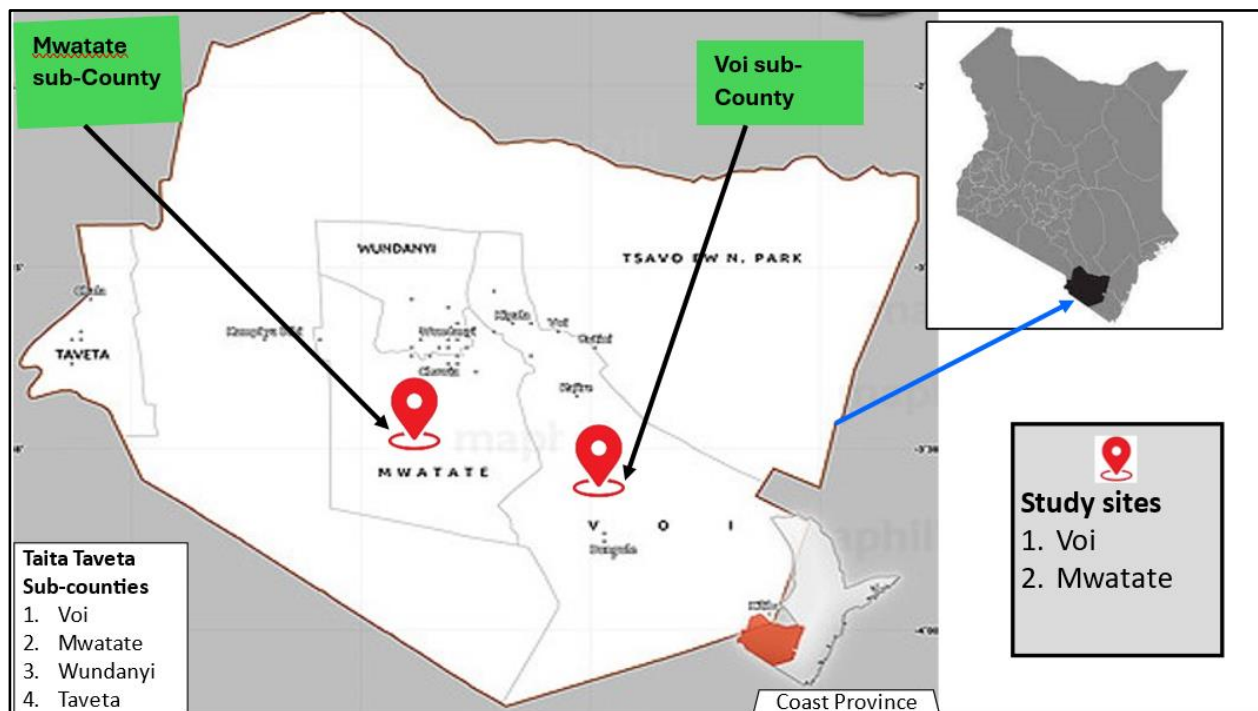
Therefore, this study moves beyond essentialist or culturally deterministic explanations of alcohol use among young people in Taita-Taveta by using multi-sited ethnography. Instead, it situates drinking within the structural conditions that shape patterns of alcohol consumption, regulation, and intervention. The approach ensures that the study captures individual drinking behaviours and the broader social, economic, and political forces that sustain them. The following sections will detail the iterative research process unfolding within the actual geographical study setting, the specific fieldwork methods, data collection processes, and analytical frameworks that guide this research. They will demonstrate how multi-sited ethnography enables a dynamic, reflexive, and critically engaged approach to studying the overlapping realities of problem drinking in Taita-Taveta—one that considers the interplay between what people say they do, what they believe they should do, and what they actually do (Brewer, 2000).

Study Setting

I conducted my study in Taita-Taveta County, Kenya, with a particular focus on Voi and Mwatate sub-counties. Taita-Taveta County is located in southwestern Kenya, bordering Kilifi

and Kwale counties to the east; Makueni, Kitui, and Tana River counties to the north; Kajiado County to the northwest; and the Republic of Tanzania to the southwest (Rop, 2014). The county has a diverse topography, comprising hilly highland areas and expansive lowland plains, each supporting distinct economic activities. While the higher-altitude regions primarily sustain horticultural farming and small-scale agriculture, the lowland plains are characterized by ranching, mining, large-scale sisal plantations, and tourism-related activities. Tsavo East and Tsavo West National Parks account for more than 60% of the county's landmass, significantly influencing land use, settlement patterns, and local economies (KNBS, 2020). Taita-Taveta County comprises four sub-counties: Voi, Mwatate, Taveta, and Wundanyi (also known as Taita). This study focused on Voi and Mwatate sub-counties (Figure 3), both of which are located in the plains region and host major urban centers along a key transnational highway connecting Kenya and Tanzania. These towns function as economic hubs, attracting diverse populations engaged in formal and informal labor, small-scale trade, and transport-related businesses. As such, the urbanization, economic shifts, and high mobility within these areas are likely to contribute to an emergence of distinct drinking patterns and alcohol-related social dynamics, making them crucial sites for understanding problem drinking among young people.

Figure 3: Map of Taita-Taveta County showing sub-counties.



While problem drinking is widely reported across Taita-Taveta County, I selected Voi and Mwatate because public discourse and media representations consistently associate these two sub-counties with excessive alcohol consumption (KNBS, 2020). Furthermore, these sub-counties present a diverse mix of rural and urban drinking environments⁸, allowing for a more comprehensive and heterogeneous exploration of how problematic drinking is performed, enacted, and regulated. By focusing on both urban drinking spaces and rural alcohol economies, be they formal or informal, this study captures the intersections of economic precarity, social identity, and alcohol consumption—aspects that remain largely underexplored in the academic literature on substance use in Kenya.

At a more personal level, beyond structural and geographical factors, I deliberately excluded the Wundanyi and Taveta sub-counties for ethical, logistical, and safety reasons. As a

⁸ Voi provides a picture of a more urban context, while Mwatate is largely rural.

native of Wundanyi sub-county, conducting fieldwork within my home region would have inevitably entailed interactions with close family members, childhood acquaintances, and community elders. Given the stigmatization of problem drinking, my presence as a researcher could have been misinterpreted as an act of moral scrutiny or public shaming. Some of the individuals affected by alcohol use, including those with whom I share personal histories, might have perceived my research as a form of surveillance rather than an objective scholarly endeavour (Marcus, 1995; Narayan, 1993). Additionally, my proximity to the community could have skewed my perspective, complicating data collection, rapport-building, and participant disclosure. Reflexively acknowledging these limitations, I chose to maintain cultural familiarity while ensuring analytical distance by conducting the study in Voi and Mwatate, where I retained a connection to the broader Taita identity but lacked very direct personal entanglements as it would have been for Wundanyi.

Taveta sub-county, on the other hand, presented significant logistical challenges. As a border region, it features distinct socio-political and economic dynamics, including cross-border trade, migration, and state surveillance, which would perhaps shape alcohol consumption in ways likely to differ from Voi and Mwatate. Moreover, accessing Taveta requires travelling over 100 kilometers from the other sub-counties, with Tsavo National Park as the in-between geographical barrier. Given the limited time and resources for conducting the ethnographic study, this distance and the unique borderland complexities made Taveta less practical for inclusion in this study.

To construct the multi-sited ethnographic spaces for my study, therefore, I treated Voi and Mwatate as just the primary physical sites for this study, but not as static, bounded locations. Instead, I spent the initial weeks of my fieldwork actively mapping the multiple sites in the form of social interactions, navigating different drinking spaces, and establishing networks (Marcus,

1995). Of which, this iterative process enabled me to identify key socially constructed sites of alcohol consumption, regulation, and discourse that extended beyond geographical boundaries.

These sites included but were not limited to:

- Drinking venues: Formal bars, Wines and Spirit joints, informal drinking dens, and home-based (illicit alcohol) brewing sites.
- Regulatory institutions: Law enforcement offices, community intervention programs, and healthcare facilities addressing alcohol-related harm.
- Economic networks: Alcohol sources, alcohol distributors, and informal vendors sustaining alcohol economies.
- Digital and media spaces: WhatsApp groups and other social media platforms where narratives around alcohol consumption and other realities are constructed and contested.

Entering the Field and Constructing the Multi-Sited Ethnography

This section details how I established my social networks, identified observational sites, and engaged potential study participants at the onset of my fieldwork. As previously noted, I am a native of Taita-Taveta County and, as such, hold pre-existing social connections with different people in the region. Some of these relationships stem from family ties, shared educational experiences, or previous social interactions. However, I did not have any prior connections to drinking spaces or the subcultures within them. Before accessing research sites, I first engaged with key gatekeepers at different levels of administration to secure permission to conduct the study. I initiated this process by introducing myself and formally seeking permission from county and sub-county gatekeepers, including the County Commissioner's office, the sub-county commissioners in Mwatate and Voi, the Department of Health, and the respective chiefs and assistant chiefs. These gatekeepers play a crucial role in authorizing research activities,

facilitating introductions, and ensuring researcher safety within their jurisdictions (Andoh-Arthur, 2019).

I conducted eight months of fieldwork, from July 10, 2023, to March 10, 2024. While I had already determined that my research would take place in Voi and Mwatate sub-counties, I needed to map and identify specific sub-sites within these two regions further to ensure that my study captured diverse drinking geographies. I obtained a list of all locations and sub-locations within Voi and Mwatate sub-counties from the County Commissioner's office to achieve this. In Kenya's administrative structure, locations and sub-locations serve as third- and fourth-tier divisions, with chiefs overseeing locations and assistant chiefs managing sub-locations (KNBS, 2020). Voi sub-county consists of six locations and 16 sub-locations, while Mwatate sub-county has 10 locations and 30 sub-locations.

Given the geographical diversity and socio-economic variations within the two sub-counties, I sought to capture drinking practices across urban, peri-urban, and rural settings. I thus selected Voi Location (urban), Mwatate Location (peri-urban), and Bura Location (rural) as my primary study sites. This selection strategy ensured a heterogeneous representation of drinking spaces and allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of problem drinking among young people. Additionally, logistical feasibility informed my decision, as these locations were relatively accessible compared to more remote areas within the two sub-counties. Some distant locations in both Voi and Mwatate would have been difficult to access due to poor road infrastructure, time constraints, and resource limitations.

Once I identified the three administrative locations, I began mapping drinking spaces to construct my multi-sited ethnography. This process entailed systematic visits to various drinking establishments, informal dens, and brewing sites, where I documented drinking spaces' spatial, economic, and social organization. Initially, I relied on visible drinking venues, but as fieldwork

progressed, I gained access to hidden, informal, and illicit drinking spaces through snowball sampling (Bernard, 2017).

During this phase, I identified and categorized drinking spaces into different types based on their structure and function. They include the formally licensed establishments such as bars, bar-restaurants, and nightclubs, which are entertainment-focused drinking spaces; the wines and spirits shops, which are retail outlets selling hard liquor ideally for off-site consumption; and the *Mnazi* pubs, which are establishments selling fermented palm wine, locally known as *Mnazi*. The informal spaces, on the other hand, include the *Mbangara* dens (unlicensed drinking joints that primarily sell the traditional brew), *Chang'aa* dens, which are illicit establishments selling *Chang'aa*, a traditional distilled liquor, and *Pasha* joints that sell a more quickened local brew made from yeast, sugar and remains from Maize. In addition to visiting and observing drinking spaces, I engaged with various community stakeholders, including the village elders, chiefs, and assistant chiefs as the administrative leaders with knowledge of local alcohol consumption patterns, the liquor licensing board members as the regulatory actors overseeing formal alcohol trade, other community leaders such as the community policing committee members and the *Nyumba Kumi* ⁹ initiative leaders, and the operators of different types of drinking establishments such as the bar owners, bartenders, and local brewers as actors facilitating alcohol consumption. This was also a way of beginning to map out key individuals that would be relevant for further engagement through in-depth interviews.

⁹ Nyumba Kumi means “ten houses,” which is a neighborhood security initiative that organizes households into clusters of 10 as an easy self-monitoring unit. Its leaders are liaisons between the community and other government officers.

In Voi, I began my fieldwork with the help of a community leader¹⁰ who was known to me before the study. However, as I established deeper networks within the drinking spaces, I quickly realized that my association with such figures posed challenges. Community liaison members were often treated with suspicion, particularly in illicit drinking spaces, due to their involvement in law enforcement crackdowns alongside chiefs and assistant chiefs. This suspicion created barriers to trust and participation, requiring me to pivot towards engaging more neutral community and youth leaders who held social legitimacy within the drinking landscape. A similar dynamic unfolded in Mwatate, where I initially connected with a sub-county liquor licensing committee member. While this connection provided valuable regulatory perspectives on alcohol control, I soon found that liquor licensing board members, much like community policing figures, were regarded with distrust by those operating the formal drinking spaces. These early observations underscored the necessity of continuously adapting fieldwork strategies to navigate power dynamics, build trust, and minimize perceived affiliations with regulatory bodies, a challenge that anthropologists James Faubion and George Marcus (2009) emphasize in their scholarly work, *Fieldwork Is Not What It Used to Be: Learning Anthropology's Method in a Time of Transition*.

Following an extensive mapping exercise, I identified 21 drinking spaces across the three locations for participant observation. The final selection balanced key drinking sites frequented by young people, ensuring the representation of various drinking cultures. The table below presents the breakdown of observation sites by type and location:

¹⁰. A community leader by the fact that he is recognized and elected by the community itself during a community meeting to help foster safety and well-being and act as a liaison between the community and local authorities.

Table 1: Drinking Spaces Observation Sites

Type of Drinking Space	# Sites in Mwatate	# Sites in Bura	# Sites in Voi	Total Sites
<i>Mnazi</i> Pubs	1	1	4	6
Bars	2	1	1	4
<i>Chang'aa</i> Joints	1	-	1	2
Wines & Spirits Shops	1	-	1	2
<i>Mbangara</i> Dens	1	2	-	3
<i>Pasha</i> Dens	1	-	3	3
TOTAL SITES	7	4	10	21

Multiple factors informed the selection of these sites, including the operators' willingness to allow research within their premises, the popularity of these venues among young people, and their significance within local drinking cultures. Community members also recommended some of the sites as the most relevant for the study. By systematically entering the field, mapping drinking spaces, and negotiating access, I constructed a multi-sited ethnographic framework that allowed for a holistic examination of alcohol use among young people in Taita-Taveta. This approach enabled me to capture diverse drinking experiences across urban, peri-urban, and rural spaces, moving beyond static, location-based analyses. Moreover, the process was not linear but rather an iterative engagement in which site selection, trust-building, and analytical focus evolved over time.

Conducting Participant Observation in Drinking Spaces

Before entering the field, I hired a local research assistant, Ms. Justina Marura, to assist with conducting participant observations and mapping drinking spaces. Justina, originally from Mwakitau, a location in the Mwatate sub-county, was well suited for this role due to her background in sociology and anthropology and her familiarity with the local social landscape. Her training in ethnographic methods, particularly participant observation and qualitative

research, made her an ideal research assistant for this study (Bernard, 2017). Hiring a research assistant not only supported my safety but also facilitated comprehensive engagement with drinking environments, as sustained interaction was necessary for developing a deeper understanding of problem drinking in Taita-Taveta (Emerson et al., 2011).

Three months into the fieldwork, we noted gender-related issues in navigating drinking spaces, especially in male-dominated and informal drinking venues. I recognized these limitations and hired a male research assistant, Mr. David Mwakio, to complement the research team. David, a resident of the Mwatate Location, was well-known among young people for organizing youth-related activities aimed at steering them away from harmful behaviours. His background in Health Records and Information Management and his strong social standing within the community facilitated smoother access to drinking spaces where female researchers often faced resistance. Male research assistants have been shown to help navigate gendered access barriers in ethnographic research, particularly when studying stigmatized or male-dominated spaces (Warren, 2001).

I trained both research assistants in research ethics, ethnographic fieldwork techniques, and participant observation methods. They completed the TRREE (2023) online module on human research ethics, ensuring they adhered to ethical research standards. Both assistants signed confidentiality agreements, committing to uphold ethical integrity and participant privacy (See Appendix 1). The training covered the research protocol, note-taking strategies, and interview techniques, alongside on-the-job mentoring, where I provided continuous feedback during weekly review meetings. Aligning my approach with anthropologist James Spradley's (1980) emphasis on systematic data collection and collaborative observation, I conducted the initial site observations alongside both research assistants. This process allowed us to compare

notes and refine our documentation techniques to ensure consistency and accuracy in data collection.

Field observations began at the drinking establishments identified during mapping. Both research assistants and I actively participated, with each of us assigned specific sites. I conducted observations across the three study locations, while for the research assistants, I let one focus on Voi and the other on Mwatate. To protect anonymity, in my dissertation I present all observational sites pseudonymously, identifying them only by drinking space type rather than their specific names or specific locations.

Each site was observed for three to five days cumulatively, with observation sessions lasting eight to ten hours per day of observation. Typically, observations began at 10:00 AM and extended until 8:00 or 9:00 PM, allowing us to capture drinking behaviours at different times of the day. We structured our observational schedule to ensure that field visits covered early days in the week, mid-week days, and weekends, recognizing that drinking patterns vary depending on economic factors such as paydays and social events (Hunt & Barker, 2001). This structured approach enabled a comparative understanding of drinking practices across different temporal and social contexts (Geertz, 1973).

During each session, we shadowed bartenders and alcohol sellers, frequently assisting with serving drinks, clearing tables, and engaging in casual conversations with patrons. This level of *deep hanging out* (Wacquant, 2004) helped us gain trust and credibility, a crucial component of successful participant observation. As we integrated into these spaces, patrons and operators gradually opened up, leading us to identify potential participants for follow-up observations. We focused on young people whom the community considered problem drinkers, a category I explore in depth in the next section.

At the end of each observation period, we conducted in-depth interviews with drinking establishment operators to supplement our field observations. These interviews provided critical contextual insights into aspects that may not have been immediately evident during participant observation or casual conversations. Through these discussions, we examined the economic motivations behind alcohol sales, drinking trends, perceptions of problem drinking, and interactions with law enforcement (Gusfield, 2013).

We documented field observations primarily using smartphones, utilizing the notes application to record key observations. This method proved less obtrusive than using notebooks, as smartphone usage is common in social spaces (Boellstorff et al., 2012)¹¹. We expanded on brief notes each night or early the following morning, incorporating analytical reflections and detailed descriptions of interactions (Emerson et al., 2011). Additionally, we took photographs and video clips to document spatial arrangements and aspects of the drinking culture, ensuring that identifying features were obscured for privacy (Pink, 2015).

By the end of eight months of fieldwork, we had compiled 148, single-spaced pages of field notes from 21 drinking spaces, covering approximately 72 days of direct observation. Beyond the drinking spaces themselves, we documented interactions in surrounding environments, including community events, local gatherings, and informal discussions in marketplaces and residential areas. Attending funerals, community meetings, and social events provided additional insights into public discourse on alcohol use, allowing us to observe drinking behaviours beyond formal drinking establishments. This approach takes inspiration from the work of anthropologists Steven Van Wolputte and Mattia Fumanti (2010), who, in *Beer in Africa*:

¹¹ Tom Boellstorff's work, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (2012), co-authored with Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor, emphasizes the importance of integrating digital tools in ethnographic research to minimize disruption within virtual communities. The principle of using common technologies to reduce observer obtrusiveness also applies to physical settings.

Drinking Spaces, States and Selves, indicate that informal gatherings, such as funerals and community meetings, serve as important venues for observing alcohol-related behaviours and understanding their socio-cultural implications.

To further integrate into drinking spaces, we often purchased soft drinks, such as soda or bottled water, and engaged in casual conversations with patrons. Beyond passive observation, we also assisted with clearing tables, serving drinks, and cleaning used cups and bottles where appropriate. These participatory activities deepened our immersion, enhancing ethnographic rapport while enabling a more nuanced understanding of drinking practices (Whyte, 1993). At the outset, we agreed not to buy alcohol for patrons, as doing so could have influenced participant behaviours and expectations. However, there were occasional moments when purchasing alcohol became necessary for maintaining trust. In Taita-Taveta, buying rounds of alcohol is a key aspect of drinking culture, where frequent refusals could raise suspicion or signal disengagement. This reflects Paul Willis's (1978) observation in England during his ethnographic study of working-class boys, where he found that they formed tight-knit groups in which mutual obligations and displays of solidarity were key. As such, in rare instances, we strategically made limited purchases to de-escalate tension and strengthen rapport. Conversely, patrons frequently offered to buy alcohol for us, particularly in formal drinking spaces. We typically declined these offers, opting instead for soft drinks, though we observed that such exchanges were more pronounced in licensed establishments than in informal spaces.

By adopting this ethnographic approach, we immersed ourselves in the social world of drinking spaces while maintaining critical analytical distance (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). This balance allowed us to capture the intricate intersections of alcohol consumption with social relationships, economic precarity, and structural inequalities. Through a combination of direct observation and casual participation, we gained insights into the symbolic and material meanings

attached to alcohol use, the organization of drinking spaces, and the lived experiences of young people engaging in problem drinking. This approach resonates with Marshall Sahlins' (1976) perspective that material behaviours are not just practical but are also laden with symbolic meanings that reflect and reinforce cultural norms and values.

This embedded approach proved invaluable in navigating trust dynamics within drinking spaces. Since the initial mapping phase helped establish familiarity, returning to these sites for formal observations became smoother and less intrusive. In several instances, local patrons introduced us as close relatives who had come in to help, a process that facilitated integration into the social environment. This form of social endorsement was critical, as it ensured that our presence did not significantly alter drinking behaviours, thereby allowing us to document authentic interactions and lived realities.

Follow-Up with Primary Study Participants

From the outset of my study, I recognized that understanding problem drinking among young people in Taita-Taveta required moving beyond drinking spaces. I needed to build closer connections and conduct follow-ups with individuals whom the community identified as having a drinking problem. However, I was initially unsure how to access these participants and gain their trust, given the stigma surrounding problem drinking (Room, 2005). As I noted earlier in the section on drinking space observations, these environments provided the primary platform for my research assistants and me to establish connections with potential primary participants. In addition to observing drinking behaviours, we relied on introductions from bar operators, alcohol sellers, and other patrons, who, after understanding the study, connected us with young people fitting our research focus. Many of these individuals were regular patrons, making it easier to develop initial rapport and gain trust.

Since drinking cultures in Taita-Taveta and Kenya more broadly have historically been male-dominated (Willis, 2002), I was not surprised that all five of our primary follow-up participants were male. Despite my efforts to recruit female participants, none agreed to participate in the follow-up phase. However, their narratives and drinking patterns emerged in the broader observations recorded in drinking spaces.

When selecting participants for the follow-up observations, I initially defined a young person as an individual aged 18 to 35 years, following definitions from both the African Union and the Kenyan Constitution (2010), which categorize youth as individuals aged 15–35 years and 18–34 years, respectively. I set 18 years as the minimum age for ethical reasons, ensuring that all participants were legally recognized as adults and capable of providing informed consent, given the sensitive nature of the research. In Kenya, the Alcoholic Drinks Control Act (2010) sets 18 years as the legal drinking age, making it unlawful for minors to enter bars, clubs, or liquor establishments unless accompanied by an adult for non-alcoholic purposes.

For the upper age limit, I remained open to local conceptualizations of youth. While official definitions of youth often emphasize chronological age, local understandings in Taita-Taveta, as in many African contexts, define youth based on relational and contextual factors rather than rigid age brackets (Christiansen & Vigh, 2006; Durham, 2000). These definitions often incorporate social markers such as marital status, household composition, and economic independence rather than just biological age (Honwana, 2012). Through tacit knowledge and field interactions, I observed that many individuals were still considered “young” not because of their age but because they remained unmarried, lived with their parents, or had not yet established independent households. Consequently, and in corresponding with Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham’s (2006) argument that youth should be understood not as a universal life stage but as a social category that is continually being constructed and reconstructed, I

conceptualize “young people” in this study as a fluid social construct rather than a fixed demographic category, shifting based on context and relational markers. The final cohort of primary study participants included five young men, all of whom lived within the study sites and voluntarily consented to participate. I intentionally focused less on actual drinkers to align with my broader conceptual-methodological framework, prioritizing navigating ethical complexities and exploring the relational and material entanglements shaping problem drinking, rather than solely focusing on individual consumption behaviours. I ensured that we sought consent only when participants were sober, guaranteeing informed and voluntary participation (Fields & Calvert, 2015). These participants ranged in age from 26 to 38, with three residing in the Mwatate sub-county and two in the Voi sub-county. To maintain anonymity, I refrain from providing further geographic details.

Screening and Selection of Primary Participants

Before initiating the follow-up process, we screened potential participants by asking, “Do you consider yourself a problem drinker?” We supplemented this self-identification criterion with additional indicators of problem drinking, including:

- Daily drinking habits
- Morning drinking (locally referred using a Swahili slang phrase *kutoa lock*,¹² or “unlocking” after a hangover.)
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms when not drinking
- Struggling to fulfil responsibilities due to drinking

¹² “Kutoa lock”—literally, “*kutoa*” means “to remove” or “to take out” in Kiswahili, while “*lock*” refers to a padlock or lock, borrowed from English. Figuratively, *kutoa lock* refers to the first drink of alcohol taken to “unlock” the body from withdrawal symptoms. In this dissertation, the phrase appears in different grammatical categories, such as the infinitive verb “*kutoa*” and the imperative verb “*toa*.”

- Concerns from family and friends about their drinking habits

If participants affirmed at least one of these criteria, we provided them with detailed information about the follow-up process before inviting them to participate. I ensured that none of the participants received alcohol from the research team to prevent ethical concerns regarding research-induced drinking behaviours.

Additionally, we asked primary participants if they were willing to have their family members participate in the study through interviews, allowing us to explore the perspectives of close relatives regarding the study phenomenon. However, most participants were reluctant to involve their family members, citing concerns about judgment, privacy, and potential social consequences. Only one participant agreed, and I interviewed one of his parents to understand the family's perspective on his drinking behaviours and experiences.

Conducting Follow-Up Observations

The follow-up observations aimed to understand how alcohol shaped participants' daily lives. We spent time with them in their natural social settings, documenting their routines and interactions. This ethnographic approach allowed me to explore alcohol consumption beyond the act of drinking itself, recognizing it as an embedded aspect of their broader social and economic realities (Hunt & Barker, 2001). For those who consented, observations started at their homes and continued throughout the day, capturing their daily hustles, social interactions, and time spent in drinking spaces. However, most participants felt uncomfortable with research activities inside their homes, preferring that observations occur in other spaces that make up their day, including where they do their hustles and drinking venues.

Similar to the drinking space observations, we recorded data through detailed field notes, capturing descriptions of participant interactions, dialogues, and daily routines. Each primary

participant underwent at least five days of follow-up observations, except for one, whose participation was cut short when he was arrested while helping sell alcohol at a *Pasha* joint. The follow-up observations followed the same schedule as drinking space observations, typically beginning at 10:00 AM and ending between 8:00 and 9:00 PM. The table below presents the five primary participants, their pseudonyms, age, sub-county, and number of follow-up days:

Table 2: The study primary participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sub-county	# Days of follow-up	Interviewed
Mwakidu	26	M	Mwatate	5	Yes
Mwakucha	38	M	Voi	6	Yes
Mwambisi	36	M	Mwatate	5	Yes
Mwambeo	26	M	Mwatate	5	Yes
Mwakaba	27	M	Voi	2	No

In-Depth Interviews with Primary Participants

Although we had informal conversations about drinking habits and experiences during the follow-up observations, we still conducted formal interviews at the end of the observation period to obtain deeper, more targeted insights. These interviews allowed participants to reflect on their drinking behaviours outside the observational context, reducing the risk of influencing their drinking habits during fieldwork (Rhodes & Moore, 2001). The interviews were audio-recorded, translated, and transcribed into English. Each session lasted 60–90 minutes and followed an unstructured interview guide (see Appendix 2). The flexibility of the interview format allowed for a conversational flow, enabling participants to contextualize their narratives based on emerging themes from prior observations (Spradley, 1980). I present three of the five

participants' narratives in Chapter 3 as case studies, illustrating how alcohol functions as an actant in young people's daily lives (Latour, 2005). I purposively selected these cases to reflect geographical variation and different alcohol consumption patterns, ensuring that the analysis captures broader social and economic dynamics influencing problem drinking.

Interviews with Other Stakeholders

As already indicated in previous sections of this chapter, my research assistants and I conducted in-depth interviews beyond conducting observations. We demonstrated that we interviewed the primary participants, alcohol sellers, and retailers after observations. In addition to these interviews, we also engaged multiple other relevant stakeholders. These interviews complemented my multi-sited ethnographic approach by providing insights from different actors involved in the drinking landscape and alcohol dynamics in Taita-Taveta. These stakeholders included alcohol producers, distributors, healthcare providers, law enforcement officials, local government representatives, and family members of primary participants. Their diverse perspectives allowed me to construct a more comprehensive understanding of problem drinking among young people in the county, recognizing that drinking behaviours are not isolated individual choices but embedded in broader social, economic, and institutional contexts (Gusfield, 2013; Hunt & Barker, 2001; Room, 2005). I personally conducted more than 80 percent of the interviews, while my research assistants helped with conducting some of them. This was deliberate so as to engage more directly with the participants, build trust, interpret subtle social cues, and maintain consistency in exploring key themes. This approach deepened my ethnographic immersion and enhanced reflexivity, allowing me to better understand participants' experiences while prioritizing ethical considerations throughout the research process. The table below provides a breakdown of the interview participants:

Table 3: The interview participants across the two sub-counties

Participant Type	Mwatate sub-County	Voi sub-County	Total <i>n</i>=39
Young People* (1 not interviewed)	3	2	5
Producers	2	1	3
Distributors	0	2	2
Sellers	3	2	5
Healthcare Providers	1	4	5
Police	2	2	4
Family	1	0	1
County Government (Paid)** (Breakdown below)	2	2	4
<i>County Administration</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Liquor Board</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>
National Government (Paid)	3	0	3
<i>Chiefs</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Social Services</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>1</i>
Non-Paid Government Officials	2	5	7
<i>Community Policing Officers</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Nyumba Kumi Heads</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Village Elders</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>

A total of 39 individuals participated in 38 interviews across the two sub-counties, involving different actors whose roles intersect with alcohol consumption and regulation. Young people engaged in problem drinking, alcohol producers, distributors, and sellers provided perspectives on alcohol availability, accessibility, and patterns of consumption. Healthcare providers and law enforcement officials offered insights into the public health and criminal justice dimensions of alcohol-related issues, while local government officers, both paid and non-paid, described regulatory mechanisms and enforcement challenges. Although I had initially planned to interview only certain key actors, I identified additional critical stakeholders during fieldwork, such as community policing committee members, *Nyumba Kumi* initiative leaders,

and village elders. Their involvement in local governance and alcohol control became increasingly evident as the study progressed.

Community policing committee members emerged as key actors in the management of alcohol-related issues. These individuals operate within Kenya's National Police Service Community Policing Framework and serve as intermediaries between the police and the community, particularly in matters related to security, law enforcement, and information-sharing (Ruteere & Pommerolle, 2003). Similarly, *Nyumba Kumi* leaders, who operate under the grassroots security framework introduced in 2013, play a significant role in monitoring neighborhood activities, reporting illicit alcohol production and sale, and working closely with law enforcement (Gjelsvik, 2020). Village elders, though not legally recognized under the Constitution of Kenya (2010), function within local administrative structures and assist in dispute resolution and community governance. Their authority in local alcohol regulation stems from their close ties to chiefs and assistant chiefs, who are officially recognized under The Chiefs Act (Cap 128) (2012) and the National Government Coordination Act (2013). These local governance actors collectively exert influence over alcohol control by enforcing informal regulations, facilitating community-based interventions, and liaising with formal state agencies (Okeyo et al., 2022). Their significance in shaping local responses to alcohol consumption, regulation, and harm reduction is discussed further in Chapter 6, where I analyze the concept of *liquid fugitivity* and the lively alcohol socialities that evade these forms of policing—they exist “on the run”, so to speak.

The interviews aimed to illuminate the complexities of problematic drinking from multiple perspectives and to explore how different actors interact and influence each other within the alcohol landscape. I designed the interviews to address key questions, including how problematic drinking is defined and described, what social and economic structures sustain it,

and how it is enacted in different spaces. We conducted semi-structured interviews, using an interview topic guide tailored for each category of participants (Bernard, 2017). This approach allowed flexibility in questioning, enabling participants to expand on key themes based on their specific roles and experiences. Through these conversations, it became clear that problematic drinking is not a static or uniform phenomenon but one that diverse and competing social, economic, and political forces constantly shape (Bourdieu, 1984; Singer, 2012).

To recruit participants, we relied on a combination of community interactions and snowball sampling (Noy, 2008). I obtained contact details for chiefs through the County Commissioner's Office, which also formally introduced me to them. The chiefs facilitated introductions to village elders, community policing officers, and *Nyumba Kumi* leaders. Other participants, such as alcohol distributors and sellers, as shown earlier, were identified during the observations at the drinking spaces and referrals. Before conducting each interview, we explained the study objectives verbally, after which we sought informed consent. We assured participants of confidentiality and reminded them that their participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time (Tracy, 2020).

The interviews took place in various locations across the two sub-counties, ensuring privacy and comfort for participants. Some took place in participants' workplaces, while others were conducted in neutral settings such as restaurants with private areas and government offices. In several instances, government youth offices offered private rooms where we could interview many participants without concerns about external interruptions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio-recorded with the consent of participants. I trained a local transcriber who subsequently transcribed and, when necessary, translated the interviews into English. We anonymized all identifying information to maintain confidentiality and securely stored the transcripts on password-protected computers (Kaiser, 2009).

To acknowledge participants' time and any potential transport costs incurred, I provided a stipend of KES 500 (~ \$4 USD) after the interview. We only informed participants of this when consenting, ensuring that financial incentives did not influence their willingness to participate. Throughout the interview process, we remained conscious of the potential power dynamics that could shape participant responses, especially when speaking with government officials or individuals involved in enforcement roles (Scheper-Hughes, 2000). We emphasized conversational engagement rather than formal interrogation, fostering an open dialogue where participants could freely share their views.

These stakeholder interviews expanded the study's scope beyond individual experiences of alcohol consumption, allowing for a broader analysis of how problematic drinking is shaped, regulated, and contested within different social, economic, and legal domains. By including alcohol producers, sellers, law enforcement officers, healthcare providers, local government representatives, and community policing actors, I can say I have captured a more layered and nuanced understanding of problematic drinking in Taita-Taveta.

Participatory Geospatial Material Semiotics Mapping

For my multi-sited ethnographic study, I also employed Participatory Geospatial Material Semiotics Mapping, an approach I adapted from participatory geospatial mapping methodologies discussed in Jean-Christophe Plantin's (2014) *Participatory Mapping: New Data, New Cartography*, which explores how integrating participatory methods with geospatial technologies reveals a community's unique spatial knowledge and cultural complexities. Thus, this method allowed for a relational and processual understanding of the drinking landscape, not simply as a set of physical locations but as a dynamic and entangled assemblage of spaces, social relations, economic practices, moral discourses, and power structures. My aim was to go beyond

conventional cartographic representations and instead reveal the complex interconnections that shape drinking behaviours, the distribution of alcohol outlets, and the sociocultural norms that sustain and regulate alcohol use.

My research team and I, therefore, engaged various stakeholders including alcohol users, producers, distributors, sellers, and village elders. We did this through participatory mapping workshops, where we sought to reconstruct local drinking geographies through the locals' lived experiences and tacit spatial knowledge. This process illuminated how human and nonhuman actants such as alcohol types, infrastructures, moral regulations, and informal governance structures interact to enact and sustain what is locally recognized as "problematic drinking." Drawing on material semiotics (Latour, 2005; Law, 2019), this mapping exercise captured the spatial-material realities of drinking, including the moral economies, regulatory mechanisms, and everyday practices that shape its performance and governance.

I used this methodological approach for several reasons. First, problem drinking is not just an individual pathology but a relational, spatially situated practice embedded in economic structures, regulatory regimes, and social discourses (Singer, 2012). Mapping the drinking landscape through local knowledge and experience made visible the spatial and material conditions that facilitate, constrain, and shape alcohol consumption patterns among young people. Second, standard ethnographic observations alone could not sufficiently capture the geospatial complexity and interrelations between drinking venues, social networks, and alcohol economies. A participatory mapping exercise helped foreground how spatial arrangements, social hierarchies, and alcohol regulation policies interact in ways that produce and sustain drinking cultures (Plantin, 2014).

Third, this method addressed the need for decolonized, community-centred research methodologies (Smith, 2012). Rather than imposing an external analytic framework,

participatory geospatial material semiotics mapping placed local actors at the center of knowledge production, allowing them to define, represent, and explain their realities. Through this process, participants actively engaged in the research, offering insights that might have remained inaccessible through conventional interviews or observations (Chilisa, 2012).

We purposively identified mapping participants through interactions during observations and through referrals. This was to ensure diverse and locally relevant perspectives. These participants included alcohol consumers, producers, distributors, sellers, and village elders who came as individuals holding key regulatory, economic, and social positions concerning alcohol in their respective localities. Members of my research team or I directly approached potential participants, explained the study objectives, and provided reasons for their selection. Those who agreed to participate formally consented (see appendix 3) and were invited to participate in participatory mapping workshops in each of the two study sub-counties.

With the help of my research assistants, I conducted two participatory mapping workshops, one in Mwatate sub-county and another in Voi sub-county, each with ten participants. To facilitate collaborative work and diverse representation of drinking landscapes, I divided the workshop participants into two groups of five. Each group received materials including A0-sized manila papers, pens, pencils, markers, different colored crayons, rulers, notebooks, glue, masking tape, and multi-colored sticky notes. Participants were encouraged to use their creativity and any additional materials to visually represent their local drinking geographies. No specific formula was imposed on how the maps should be drawn; participants relied on their local spatial knowledge, tacit experiences, and shared narratives to develop non-digital maps that depicted the spatial-material realities of drinking in their localities.

Each group discussed and assigned roles before starting the mapping process, ensuring that the exercise remained collaborative and reflective of collective knowledge rather than

individual perspectives. The mapping process lasted approximately three hours, during which participants sketched and annotated maps highlighting drinking spaces, alcohol flows, associated networks, and spatialized social and regulatory structures. The maps' different colors, symbols, and artistic choices reflected participants' perceptions of alcohol-related spaces, distinguishing between formal and informal outlets, high-risk areas, and regulatory spaces such as police posts and chiefs' offices, among other actors and landmarks in the areas.

After the mapping exercise, each group presented their maps, describing their artistic choices and explaining how spaces, social groupings, alcohol types, and normative practices interacted to shape problematic drinking in their communities. These presentations were audio-recorded and supplemented by detailed field notes capturing participant discussions, debates, and reflections on the process.

Following these presentations, all participants engaged in a focused group discussion, where they collectively analyzed the multiple realities of problem drinking and narrated the broader socio-spatial story of alcohol consumption in their localities. This discussion, also audio-recorded, allowed participants to critically engage with their own representations, further refining the narratives that emerged through the mapping exercise. At the end of the workshops, we had four maps, two from each sub-county. These maps serve as spatial ethnographic artifacts, providing empirical evidence of how drinking landscapes are constituted and contested. Below, I present a sample of photographs captured during the mapping process. However, the analysis, maps, and findings from the workshops are presented in Chapter 4 on geographies of drinking, where I examine how alcohol spaces, actors, and socio-political forces interact to sustain and regulate drinking among young people.



Figure 5: A sample picture from Voi. It shows participants engaging in the participatory mapping exercise, sketching and annotating maps of their local drinking landscapes

Participants formally consented to participate in the study and provided separate consent to have photos taken during the exercise (see Appendix 4). To ensure anonymity, we avoided images that revealed identifiable faces. Each participant received KES 1200 (approximately \$ 9.6 USD) to compensate for their time and travel expenses.

Reflecting on this method, I can say it proved valuable, especially in capturing the heterogeneous, emergent, and relational nature of alcohol consumption and regulation in Taita-Taveta. Rather than viewing alcohol use as isolated behaviour, this approach illustrated how drinking practices, regulatory mechanisms, economic interests, and sociocultural discourses intertwine to shape what is locally recognized as problem drinking (Latour, 2005; Valverde, 2009).



Figure 4: A sample picture from Mwatate. It shows participants engaging in the participatory mapping exercise, sketching and annotating maps of their local drinking landscapes

Moreover, the participatory nature of the mapping exercise challenged traditional researcher-subject hierarchies, making participants co-producers of knowledge rather than passive informants (Smith, 2012). By enabling participants to visualize and narrate their drinking geographies, the exercise foregrounded local epistemologies and situated problem drinking within its broader socio-material context rather than reducing it to just a public health concern. The generated maps and discussions provided a rich, place-based understanding of problematic drinking, offering insights beyond individual behaviours to illuminate the broader structural, material, and social processes shaping drinking cultures.

Data Analysis

As indicated in earlier sections, I audio-recorded all interviews, as well as the presentations and focus group discussions from the Participatory Geospatial Material Semiotics

Mapping workshops. I transcribed and translated these recordings into English where necessary. A trained local transcriber assisted with the transcription after I provided training on research ethics, transcription accuracy, and the general objectives of the study to ensure contextually accurate translations (Bucholtz, 2000; Poland, 1995). Transcription occurred concurrently with data collection, allowing for cyclical engagement with the data throughout the fieldwork. By the end of data collection, most of the transcripts were already available for analysis. The dataset for this study, therefore, consisted of interview and focus group transcripts, ethnographic fieldnotes, non-digital sketched maps, photographs, and video recordings.

As is characteristic of ethnographic research, my data analysis followed an iterative and reflexive approach (Emerson et al., 2011; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). I conducted ongoing analysis during fieldwork, engaging in weekly debriefing meetings with research assistants and systematically reading and re-reading fieldnotes and transcripts to identify emerging themes and refine the research process. This iterative engagement allowed me to adjust data collection strategies where necessary, ensuring that emerging themes could be further explored in subsequent observations and interviews (Agar, 1980).

To analyze the data, I employed a combined thematic and narrative analysis approach. This combination was most appropriate for this study, as it provided a comprehensive understanding of problem drinking among young people in Taita-Taveta, capturing both structural patterns and subjective lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis allowed me to systematically identify and categorize recurring patterns across the dataset, including structural drivers of alcohol consumption, socio-economic constraints, regulatory gaps, and moral discourses surrounding drinking. This approach was particularly useful for identifying broader patterns of alcohol use, regulation, and social meanings across various participant groups.

Narrative analysis complemented this thematic approach by examining how young people construct and convey their drinking experiences through personal and collective storytelling. As drinking practices are deeply embedded in social identities, agency, and moral positioning, narratives provided rich insights into how alcohol consumption is rationalized, resisted, or normalized within specific social worlds (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012; Mattingly & Garro, 2000). This analytical lens allowed me to bridge macro-level structural patterns with micro-level experiences, capturing how broader socio-economic and cultural forces intersect with individual drinking trajectories (Ochs & Capps, 2002). Thematic analysis helped identify structural dimensions of drinking, while narrative analysis revealed subjective and performative aspects of alcohol use, highlighting how young people make sense of their drinking behaviours within social and moral frameworks.

To systematically manage and code the data, I used NVivo software version 14, a qualitative data analysis tool that facilitated the organization, retrieval, and cross-referencing of themes and narratives. I opted for paragraph-level coding rather than line-by-line coding for strategic and practical reasons. Paragraph-level coding enabled me to retain the broader meaning and thematic coherence within narratives, preventing the fragmentation of participant stories and lived experiences (Saldaña, 2021). Given the ethnographic nature of my study, this approach ensured that I preserved participants' voices, experiences, and storytelling structures while maintaining analytical rigor.

To develop a systematic and robust coding framework, I first analyzed four interview transcripts and four sets of fieldnotes, selecting these from different participant categories and observational sites to ensure representative diversity in the initial coding phase. This initial analysis allowed me to develop a preliminary codebook, which I then refined iteratively as I proceeded with coding the rest of the data (Gibbs, 2018). While the codebook provided a

structured framework, I remained open to new, emerging themes, ensuring flexibility and responsiveness to data-driven insights.

This analytical approach allowed for a layered and reflexive engagement with the data, ensuring that both structural and experiential dimensions of problem drinking were systematically analyzed. The combination of thematic and narrative methods, supported by NVivo-based coding, provided a methodological synergy that enabled me to capture the complex, interconnected realities of alcohol consumption, regulation, and social meanings in Taita-Taveta. The findings generated from this analysis are discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, where I explore how drinking landscapes, social norms, and economic constraints shape young people's alcohol consumption patterns.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained through multiple layers of institutional, national, and local authorization processes to ensure compliance with both international and local research ethics standards. The study was first approved by the University of Manitoba Health Research Ethics Board (HS25828-82023:021), affirming that the research adhered to ethical guidelines for human subjects research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and risk minimization. Locally in Kenya, the study received ethical approval from the Amref Ethics and Scientific Review Committee (ESRC) under approval number ESRC P1423/2023, which is a recognized body for reviewing health and social science research involving human participants.

Beyond institutional ethical approvals, conducting research in Kenya required multiple layers of governmental and administrative authorizations at both national and county levels. I secured a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) under license number NACOSTI/P/23/26825, which is a statutory

requirement for all foreign and local researchers conducting studies in Kenya. This national research permit was a prerequisite for obtaining additional approvals at the county level, ensuring that my study adhered to legal and administrative frameworks governing research involving human participants in Kenya.

At the county level, I sought permission from key administrative offices in Taita-Taveta County to ensure that local authorities were aware of and supported the research. These included:

- The County Commissioner's Office (Ref. No. CC/TVT/ADM.5/VOL.III (96)), which oversees security and administrative matters in the county.
- The County Department of Health (Ref. No. TVT/HS/CDH/VOL.2/(508)), given the study's focus on public health concerns related to alcohol consumption.
- The Sub-County Commissioners' Offices in Voi and Mwatate, which serve as the direct administrative link to local governance structures.
- Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs, who are responsible for governance at the location and sub-location levels.
- Village Elders, who play an informal but critical role in community governance, mediation, and law enforcement in rural Kenya.

In addition to securing approval from the County Department of Health, the department appointed the County Research Coordinator as the designated person to remain in contact with during my research period. As such, I maintained regular communication with him, providing updates on the study's progress while ensuring I did not disclose any confidential or sensitive information. Thus, upholding ethical standards of confidentiality and reinforcing a clear boundary between research oversight and participants privacy. Furthermore, the plan is that, through his coordination, I will present the final findings to all key stakeholders within the

department, facilitating a structured dissemination process that integrates research insights into policy discussions and programmatic responses.

Given that part of my research involved conducting interviews with law enforcement officers, I also needed specific authorization from the Kenya Police Service¹³. Through the County Police Commander, I obtained an official approval letter that granted permission to interview police officers on their perspectives and experiences regarding alcohol-related issues in Taita-Taveta.

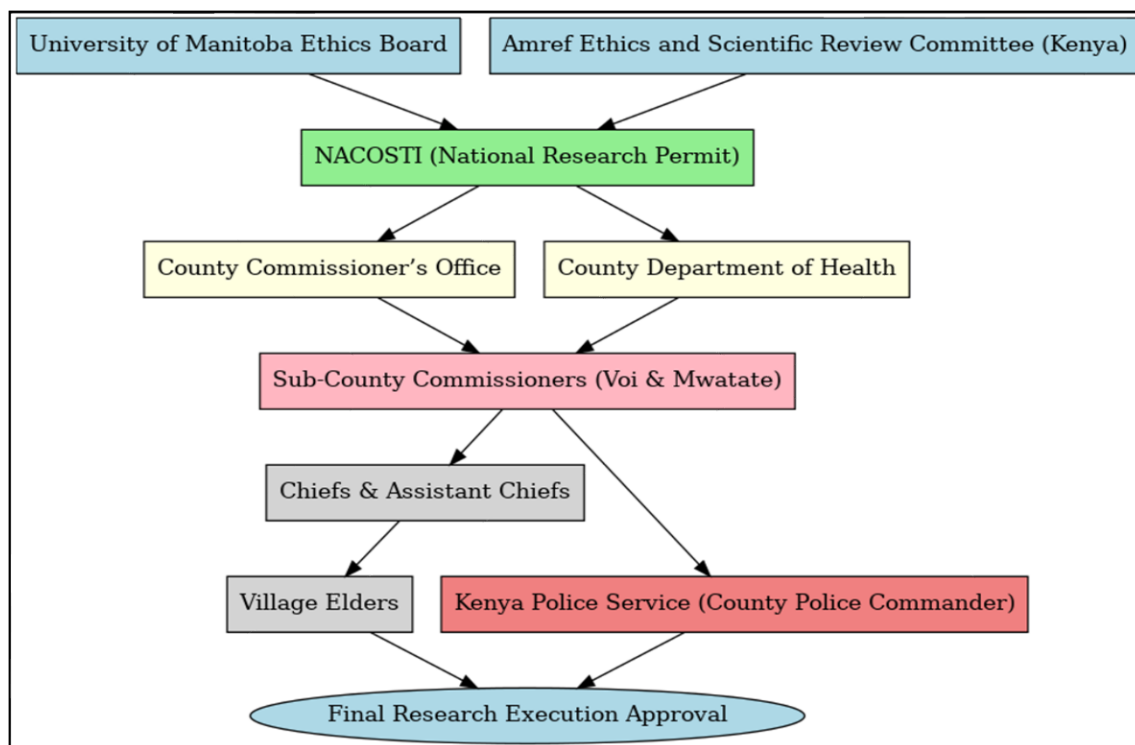


Figure 6: *Layers of Ethical and Administrative Approvals*

¹³ The Kenya Police Service supported my research and encouraged me to seek assistance when needed. However, I treated their authorization strictly as procedural, solely to facilitate interviews with law enforcement officers. To safeguard the integrity of my research and the well-being of participants, I deliberately limited further engagement. Given the sensitivity of alcohol-related issues and community-police relations, maintaining distance was key to avoid perceptions of affiliation with the police or government, which could have jeopardized trust, deterred participation, or led participants to feel uncomfortable in sharing information. This boundary protected participants from potential harm and ensured they felt safe sharing their perspectives in an independent scholarly context.

All these approvals¹⁴ were crucial for research legitimacy and community acceptance. In Kenya, obtaining formal authorization from governmental and local administrative offices is not only a legal requirement but also an important step in ensuring community cooperation and minimizing suspicion around research activities, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics like problem drinking and law enforcement interactions. These approvals signaled to participants and the broader community that the research was legitimate, ethically approved, and supported by the relevant authorities. All official approval letters are attached as appendices, and below is a summary chart illustrating the multiple layers of ethical and administrative approvals that were required before the commencement of the study.

Confidentiality

Ensuring confidentiality remained critical in this study, particularly because problem drinking is a stigmatized issue with elements of illegality, especially in cases involving informal alcohol production, distribution, or sales of unauthorized alcohol. If their identities were revealed, participants risked social embarrassment, criminalization, or even loss of employment (Sieber, 1998; Wiles et al., 2008). Given these risks, I enforced strict confidentiality measures throughout the research process. While interviews and discussions naturally involved mentioning identifiable details, such as personal names and locations, I anonymized all collected data using coded unique identifiers and pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.

I also made deliberate ethical decisions to omit particularly sensitive data that, if included, could cause harm to participants. I excluded accounts and narratives that posed high risks of exposure or legal implications from the final report, ensuring adherence to the ethical

¹⁴ See appendices 6 – 12 for the multiple layers of approval.

principles of beneficence and non-maleficence (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994). To reinforce confidentiality, I required all members of the research team, including research assistants and the transcriber, to sign confidentiality agreements after undergoing training in research ethics. These agreements legally bound them to uphold data protection and participant anonymity (Liamputtong, 2006).

Informed Consent

Participants provided informed consent before taking part in interviews, participatory geospatial material semiotics mapping exercises, and follow-up observations with primary study participants¹⁵. Written consent was the standard procedure, and we provided consent forms in both Kiswahili and English, allowing participants to select their preferred language. Each participant received a copy of the signed consent form. However, in cases where participants felt uncomfortable keeping a copy, often due to fears of association with the study, we retained the form and attached a note indicating that it belonged to the participant, along with the reason for retention (Miller & Boulton, 2007).

Beyond general informed consent, in my capacity as the lead researcher I implemented additional consent measures for the collection of photos and videos. Participants provided written consent if they agreed to be photographed or filmed. However, my team and I prioritized visual anonymity, ensuring that photographs and videos did not reveal identifiable faces. When faces appeared visible, I digitally blurred them to maintain anonymity (Pink, 2020).

Despite these formal procedures, I recognized the disruptive nature of written consent in sensitive research settings (Hedgecoe, 2017). In some high-risk contexts, such as interviews with informal alcohol vendors or individuals concerned about job security, we provided the option of

¹⁵ See appendix 13 for interviews sample informed consent form.

verbal consent instead of written consent. This approach ensured that consent procedures did not expose participants to additional risks and allowed them to exercise greater agency in the research process (Crow et al., 2006).

Ethical Considerations in Researching Alcohol Use

Throughout the research process, intoxication posed a critical ethical concern, particularly regarding obtaining valid consent. My research team and I established a strict rule against obtaining consent from visibly intoxicated individuals (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). This guideline was especially important when engaging primary study participants, whom we followed over multiple days, including during their drinking activities. In several instances, participants shared personal stories while intoxicated that they might not have disclosed while sober. To avoid ethical dilemmas and ensure that participants maintained agency over their narratives, we conducted member checks, reviewing the data with participants during their sober moments to verify what information they were comfortable including in the study (Carlson, 2010).

These ethical decisions played a critical role in protecting participant autonomy, but they are not unique to this study. Instead, they reflect broader ethical challenges that researchers face when conducting studies in sensitive, high-risk settings, particularly within medical anthropology and public health research on substance use and stigma (Bourgois, 2003; Rhodes, 2009).

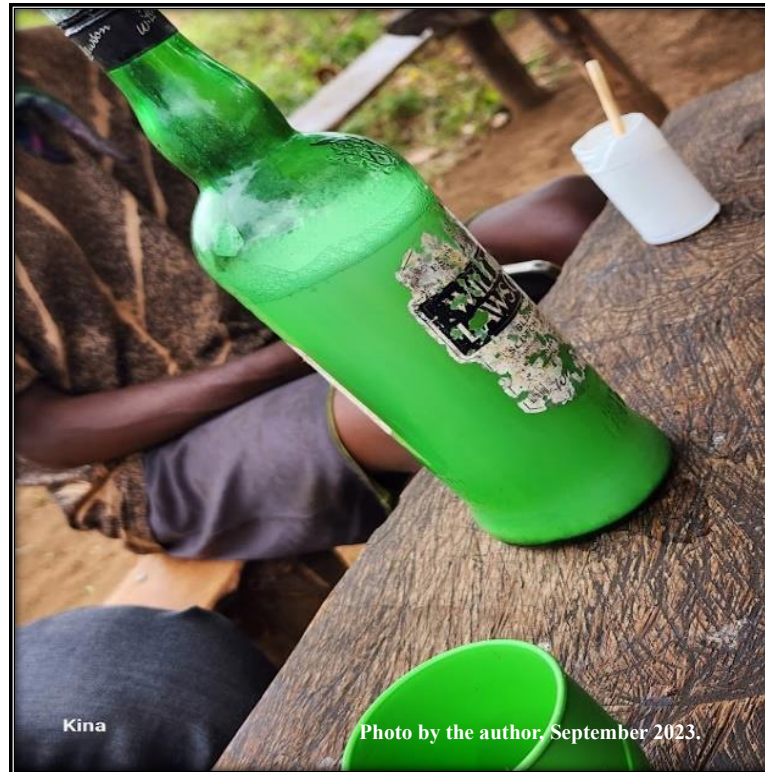
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have detailed the methodological framework of this study, highlighting the epistemological, ethical, and practical decisions that shaped the research process. While conducting ethnographic research in alcohol-drinking spaces in Taita-Taveta, I navigated complex positionalities as both an insider and an outsider. I actively negotiated gendered

vulnerabilities, community perceptions, and ethical dilemmas to ensure meaningful engagement with participants. Using multi-sited ethnography as my methodological approach, I examined problem drinking beyond individual behaviours, capturing its intersections with economic precarity, social norms, and informal alcohol economies. I conducted participant observations, in-depth interviews, and participatory geospatial material semiotics mapping to document the lived realities of young drinkers and the regulatory forces shaping alcohol consumption. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and researcher safety, guided every research aspect, ensuring methodological rigor and reflexive engagement with the field. This gave me the confidence to study substance use within broader social, economic, and political contexts rather than through narrow biomedical or moralistic frameworks. By centering the voices of young people, alcohol sellers, law enforcement, and regulatory actors, I provide a more nuanced understanding of problem drinking. The following chapters build on these methodological foundations to present the findings and analysis of this multi-sited ethnographic study.

CHAPTER THREE

Alcohol as an Actant



Alcohol, when sealed in its bottle, does not harm anyone—it just sits there. But the moment it’s poured into a glass, and you drink it, everything changes... It starts talking, and it’s been that way for years—it never changes. It just waits for someone to pick it up, and once they do, it changes them.

—Young man from Voi)

The room is now active, people are streaming in. Some are engaged in card games, while others are smoking cigarettes or consuming bhang (Marijuana). Most of the individuals present are actively chewing Muguka which is a variety of Khat (Catha edulis). Lady N (Chang’aa seller) is seated at the center of the room, holding her Muguka and the two alcohol jugs, which are positioned in the middle. Adjacent to her is a bag containing cigarettes, chewing gum, and ground nuts. An old man, looking very decent in a coat, blue jeans, and leather shoes, enters, holding an umbrella. He is accompanied by a young man, aged 18 to 20, wearing shorts and a raincoat with a blue cape. As they enter, the old man greets in Taita language, shouting, “Are you all well?” Everyone responds, saying their things, assuring the old man that they are fine. Lady N chimes in, “Fine,

welcome. I can see you didn't even want to wait for the rain to end." The old man responds, "If we wait for the rain to stop, we will not come here because the rain is unpredictable; it can even rain all day." Lady N agrees, the old man sits beside me with his companion next to him. The lady smiles at the old man and asks, "How can I help you?" The old man says to Lady N, "I have come today with my grandson. I want to introduce him officially to alcohol so that I can bless him, and alcohol will never harm him or make him look stupid." People laugh, and he continues, "The reason why alcohol harms the new generation today is because they started it without being blessed." The old man explains, "My grandson has been drinking secretly, thinking that I don't know," smiling while shaking his head. "So, I have decided to bless him so that it won't harm him." I ask him if he was blessed when he was young. He looks at me, nodding, saying, "Yes, that's why till date, I'm drinking, and it has never harmed me." The man tells the lady, "Give me a full one with two tot caps." The lady takes the jug, pours the drink into the chrome bottle, fills it, and then hands it to the old man along with two tots. I wait eagerly to see how he is going to bless his grandson. The old man takes the drink, pours it into the tot caps, takes one tot cap, and starts talking to it, saying, "Hey, your alcohol, don't ever harm my grandson. Make him wise, make him get married to a wise woman, amen." Then, he sips it and passes it to his grandson. The grandson takes a sip, and they continue drinking. [Wednesday, November 22, 2023, Chang'aa joint]

Introducing Alcohol as an Actant: A Thing That Does Things

In this lively scene, composed in late November 2023, from a *Chang'aa* drinking joint we see alcohol is portrayed as more than a passive substance—it is an active participant in shaping the unfolding social scene. The old man's blessing ritual suggests alcohol's performative role as an "actant", to borrow the words of a social studies of science scholar Bruno Latour (2005, p. 54)—that is, an object possessing agency in social networks. Alcohol here is a mediator between generations, a tool of initiation, and an emblem of wisdom. Through it, the old man seeks to protect and legitimize his grandson's drinking while accepting its persistence in the world, hence, reinforcing intergenerational bonds and cultural continuity. This aligns with *Actor-Network Theory* (Latour, 2005), which argues that objects—whether technologies, substances, or everyday things—play crucial roles in shaping human relations. Alcohol, in this scene, not only facilitates the ritual but also embodies the capacity to bless, protect, and transform. The blessing

ritual conveys that alcohol is an intermediary in social networks, participating in the construction of relationships, the reinforcement of norms, and the expression of agency.

Moreover, drawing from John Law's material semiotics, alcohol in the Taita context can be seen as a material entity that performs semiotic work. Law (2002) emphasizes that things are entangled in webs of meaning and activity. Alcohol acts both materially (as a tangible substance consumed) and semiotically (as a symbol of blessing and wisdom). In this setting, alcohol is not just a drink; it becomes a social lubricant, a medium through which respect, humor, and legitimacy are expressed. This resonates with Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai, 1988), where commodities acquire value not merely through their utility but through their circulation and the meanings they accumulate in the process.

Furthermore, alcohol can be regarded as a vital “*doing thing*” (Labanyi, 2010) (p. 223). As cultural studies theorist Jo Labanyi (2010) argues, objects are not passive but co-constitute emotions, identities, and social practices through their material presence and affective impact. Here, the old man's use of alcohol to impart wisdom and bestow blessings exemplifies how material things actively shape social relations. Alcohol is not merely a medium but an agent, participating in the production of affect and meaning. And, following the work of Tim Ingold (2010) and Ian Hodder (2012), alcohol can be understood as part of an *entanglement* where agency is distributed across both human and non-human actors. This challenges the traditional subject-object dichotomy by recognizing that agency is not limited to humans but emerges through interactions between people and things in networked relationships. As Hodder (2012) argues, things have a way of pulling people into relationships—alcohol, in this context, entangles the old man, his grandson, and the community in a network of meaning-making, notions of the traditional, and identity reinforcement. In this way, as a doing thing, alcohol performs “multiple enactments” (Mol, 2002a: p. 32) by taking on different, diverse, and even contradictory forms

and functions depending on the context. In the ethnographic sketch above, alcohol enacts multiple roles: it is a gift, a tool of initiation, and a symbol of protection. It also carries ambiguity, serving both as a potential source of harm and as a protective agent once blessed. This duality reflects what South African historian Jacob Dlamini refers to as the complex and morally ambiguous “acts” within social encounters (Dlamini, 2014). Dlamini’s concept of moral ambiguity reflects how individuals and substances like alcohol can hold dual roles within society, embodying both positive and negative potential. Just as a person can embody contradictory roles (such as hero and collaborator), alcohol’s influence in social settings can be similarly unpredictable and layered. Its effects vary depending on context, intention, and the community’s rituals around it, leading to outcomes that may simultaneously foster social bonds and introduce social risks. This perspective, as Dlamini suggests, emphasizes the way powerful social forces—whether individuals or substances—do not exist in simplistic terms but rather in dynamic, shifting roles that continuously redefine social relationships.

Further, the act of blessing performed by the old man portrays alcohol as playing a performative role. As Daniel Miller and colleagues emphasize, objects are not merely representations of human actions but are constitutive of those actions (Miller et al., 2005). The old man’s invocation—“Make him wise, make him get married to a wise woman, amen”—is not just a prayer but a “performative utterance” (Austin et al., 1979: p. 233), mediated by alcohol. This is reminiscent of the *Zimbabwe Bush Pump* (De Laet & Mol, 2000), a technology that, through its use and circulation, becomes a network in itself. Similarly, alcohol in this context does not just participate in the ritual; it enables the ritual, shaping its outcomes and meanings. And the laughter and shared humor accompanying the ritual parallel Paul Manning’s *Semiotics of Drinking* (Manning, 2017), which explores how drinking practices generate meanings, emotions, and social bonds. In the depicted Taita *Chang’aa* drinking setting, the consumption of

alcohol is intertwined with the enactment of cultural values and norms, facilitating not only the blessing but also the bonding between the old man and his grandson. Alcohol, in this sense, acts as a performative agent, constructing identities and mediating relationships and generally affecting even in its material form. As Labanyi (2010) argues, objects generate emotions and affect through their presence and use. The old man's ritual illustrates how alcohol becomes a medium for expressing and evoking care, protection, and wisdom, suggesting that emotions are not contained within individuals but emerge from and circulate between people and things (Brennan, 2004). The affective force of alcohol shapes the interaction, producing emotional resonance among those present. Nigel Thrift's *Non-Representational Theory* further emphasizes that things have affective capacities that shape experiences and interactions (Thrift, 2008). In this scene, the material presence of alcohol—not just as a drink but as a performative object—creates an atmosphere of conviviality, humor, and shared purpose. The grandson's 'official' initiation into drinking becomes an embodied form of knowledge, transmitted through the ritual and mediated by alcohol.

Therefore, through these multiple theoretical and analytical lenses—ANT, material semiotics, and affect theory—we see that alcohol is not merely something people consume or a simple product of human desire. Rather, it “acts” independently, producing material effects on bodies, mediating relationships, shaping identities, and fulfilling significant social functions. The old man's ritual illustrates how alcohol operates within a network of meanings, traditions, and affective resonances. It transforms a private act of drinking into a public ritual of initiation and protection, demonstrating that alcohol is a vital actant that weaves the social fabric. But the question here is, do all types of alcohol act in a similar way or what difference is there, if any? In the next section, I explore how different types of alcohol—such as *Chang'aa*, *Mnazi*, *Mbangara* and *Pasha* as the local alcohol, and commercial spirits and beers act and perform distinctive roles

within Taita community¹⁶. Each type of alcohol has its own distinctive character or “personality”, bringing unique meanings, practices, and social effects. This diversity further illustrates the complexity of alcohol as an actant in various social contexts.

Mnazi – The ‘Soft Spoken’ Permissible Alcohol

Mnazi refers to a traditional fermented beverage derived from the sap of specific palm trees, particularly the coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) and wild date palms (*Phoenix reclinata*) in some places. This drink is widely consumed in various coastal and lowland regions of Kenya, including Taita-Taveta County, where it plays a pivotal role in shaping social relationships, rituals, and identity. *Mnazi* is not merely a consumable product but functions as a social agent—an actant—mediating relationships, power dynamics, and cultural expressions symbolizing a lifestyle woven into the rhythms of life in the region.

The production of *Mnazi* begins high in the swaying palm trees. Skilled tappers (*Wagemaji*) – who in Taita-Taveta, they have basically been imported like skilled laborers from the lower Coastal belt—they scale these trees to extract the sap through a process called *Kutonesha* – which is basically making an incision at the crown and meticulously inserting a container to collect the flowing sap.

The sap must be collected with care to ensure the tree remains healthy for continued tapping, however, are tapped exclusively for wine production, sacrificing the growth of coconuts to maximize sap collection. Harvesters typically ascend the trees in the early morning and

¹⁶ Willis (2002), in his historical analysis of *Potent Brews* in East Africa, analyzes the regulatory, social, and political dynamics surrounding alcohol. In my dissertation, I take a broader approach and explore how local classifications of different alcohol types in Taita Taveta emerge through socio-material and economic relations. Instead of viewing potency solely as a historical marker of social structures, I show how different alcohol types acquire meaning and significance through their interactions with moral economies, regulatory systems, and material practices. This approach illustrates how historical legacies and contemporary realities both shape relational processes.

evening to collect fresh sap in containers made from natural materials like gourds or modern alternatives such as repurposed plastic containers. The sap is highly perishable and begins to ferment almost immediately after collection. Within a few hours, natural yeasts present in the environment convert the sugars in the sap into alcohol, producing a mildly intoxicating beverage. If left longer, the alcohol content increases, making the drink more potent, but it also begins to sour due to further microbial activity; however, it is unclear whether any processes are in place to preserve it at a certain level of fermentation.



Figure 7: The Mnazi tapping process and palm tree farm. **Left:** A repurposed plastic bottle tied with palm fibres, capturing fresh sap in the Mnazi tapping process. **Right:** A farm with towering palm trees, some of which are specifically designated for Mnazi production. Photos by author, September 2023.

Fresh morning *Mnazi* is sweet and light, earning it a reputation as both a refreshing drink and a mild social lubricant. As the sap ferments throughout the day, the alcohol content increases, and the evening *Mnazi* becomes more potent. Freshly collected *Mnazi* is sweet with a low alcohol content (around 2-4%), but prolonged fermentation can result in alcohol levels of up to 8-10% (Kadere, 2021) popularly known in the locals as *Kilalo*. Tappers and sellers often note

the medicinal value of the morning sap, believed to boost appetite and promote digestion. As one tapper joked, “If you want your wife to gain weight, give her fresh *Mnazi* because it thickens the body”.

Mnazi’s history in Taita-Taveta county, while it may trace back to its historical existence in the coastal region, its current seemingly large presence is a very recent development that has peaked gradually from when *Mnazi* was legalized for the Kenyan coastal counties in 2003. The commercial trade of *Mnazi*, however, surged during the late 1990s under the influence of the then politician Karisa Maitha. Maitha championed the legalization and regulation of *Mnazi*, advocating for the rights of producers and sellers, which led to increased acceptance and commercialization of the beverage (Macharia, 2021). Conversations with *Mnazi* sellers and local communities in Taita-Taveta reported that Taveta and Musau areas of the county have since joined as key suppliers, contributing to the drink’s enduring presence in the region. And, being a legalized traditional alcohol, therefore, *Mnazi* is subject to local laws and regulations surrounding alcohol. In Taita-Taveta, the *Mnazi* pubs, like any other formal bars are licensed and regulated primarily under the county-level *Taita-Taveta County Liquor Licensing Act (2016)* (Taita-Taveta County Government, 2016), which largely mirrors the national *Alcoholic Drinks Control Act (2010)*, popularly known as the Mututho Law (Republic of Kenya, 2010). The law requires operators to apply for a liquor license through the county government, with inspections carried out to ensure compliance before licensing. Comparably, *Mnazi* pubs -while seemingly embodying moral sensibilities and political endorsements that present *Mnazi* as a “respectable” drink –have a lower license fee compared to other outlets. The minimum license cost for *Mnazi* pubs is KES 4,000 (~ USD \$32), in addition to other permits, such as a business permit and public health certification. Enforcement, however, is a collaborative role involving multiple

authorities, including chiefs, the police, county liquor boards, and public health officers, although corruption and inadequate enforcement often seem to undermine these efforts.

Mnazi is distributed from the coastal regions of Kwale and Kilifi, as well as Musau and Taveta, to other parts of Taita-Taveta. The wine is primarily transported using motorbikes or vehicles, especially during peak seasons when demand is high. However, bad weather presents logistical challenges. During one of the very early interviews we held with alcohol operators, a 45-year old female seller explained of the adaptations they have to make based on seasonal changes: “*When roads are flooded, we have to use cars like Probox (a versatile and multi-purpose boxy Toyota vehicle popular in East Africa) to transport Mnazi, as motorbikes can’t make it through.*” The demand peaks during the hot weather season, with sellers reporting sales of up to 100 bottles of 750ml per day. In contrast, rainy seasons dampen demand, as patrons prefer stronger drinks like *Chang’aa* to stay warm. For continuity in such times, however, and to ensure a steady supply, sellers maintain close relationships with specific tappers. The seller-tapper relationship is crucial, as the seller often receives bonuses like extra liters to cover



Figure 8: A stationary motorbike loaded with multiple 35-litre blue jerrycans of *Mnazi* from Taveta, already being distributed to local sellers using a transfer pile connecting to smaller jerrycans. Photo by author, August 2023.

transportation costs. This system of reciprocity and mutual dependency ensures business continuity even during low production seasons.

Mnazi is often viewed as a respectful drink, distinct from stronger spirits. Patrons refer to it as *Pombe ya Heshima* (a beer of honor or respect), contrasting it with spirits like *Chang'aa*, which are associated with disruptive behaviour. During an early evening conversation with patrons at a local *Mnazi* pub, a middle-aged male patron emphasized the sociability of the drink, “*Mnazi* brings people together—those who drink it rarely get into fights”. Moreover, practices surrounding *Mnazi* reflect both tradition and convenience. The drink is often served in 750ml and 250ml repurposed spirits bottles, colloquially known as *Dabali*¹⁷ and *Chupa* respectively – with *Dabali* being more popular in urban contexts and *Chupa* in the rural areas. Traditional tools like wooden straws with mesh filters, known as *mrija* and small gourd known as *mboko* (shown in picture below on the right), are still used, albeit minimally, revealing a cultural significance and maintaining a traditionalist aesthetics in the drinking experiences. However, the traditional



Figure 9: *Mnazi* consumption materials. **Left:** Repurposed and washed 250ml bottles of commercial spirits prepared for retailing *Mnazi*. **Middle:** A *Dabali* bottle of *Mnazi* shared by two individuals using plastic tumblers. **Right:** Traditional vessels, *Mboko* and *Mrija*, historically used for drinking *Mnazi*. Left & middle photos by author, November & September 2023; Right photo shared on social media, October 2023.

¹⁷ *Dabali* is a colloquial term derived from the English word “double” to refer to a larger-size bottle used for selling the *Mnazi* drink. Usually, it is a 750 ml repurposed bottle, sourced from other commercial alcohol brands, and signifies a larger serving than the standard bottle, which is the 250 ml bottle.

tools have largely been overtaken by plastic ones, especially the introduction of plastic tumblers that are readily available in the markets.

Keeping up the momentum of the more experienced *Mnazi* cultures as is at the lower coastal communities, in Taita-Taveta too, *Mnazi* emerges as more than just a beverage—even here it is embedded in the beliefs and superstitions as held by the Mijikenda communities of the coastal belt. The palm tree from which it is tapped, for instance, is considered sacred, and that is why only specific individuals qualify to be tappers¹⁸. Besides, there is one story that recounts how disrespecting the tree—by urinating near it or tapping it with a toothbrush—can invite misfortune, including accidents or illness. “This tree holds grudges,” a tapper in Taveta exclaimed, while visiting one of the sources for the *Mnazi* sold in Taita-Taveta, as he pointed to a nearby palm tree and recounted how he once ended up in the hospital after a falling palm stem struck him. As a result, we can therefore conclude that *Mnazi*, like is in other parts of the Kenyan coastal region, occupies a unique space in Taita-Taveta’s cultural and also economic landscape, as it is not just a drink but a symbol of tradition, unity, and sustenance. The entangled relationships between tappers, sellers, and consumers illustrate the interdependence within the *Mnazi* trade, while the drink itself fosters social cohesion and offers economic opportunities. *Mnazi* therefore emerges as an actant—a non-human participant shaping social interactions and economic networks. Its presence influences social practices and notions of “the traditional”, and bonds people together into communities, making it a vital part of life in Taita-Taveta.

Mbangara: A Tradition at Odds with the Law

¹⁸ In Taita Taveta, for instance, we found that the majority of *Mnazi* tappers are primarily from the Wasambaa ethnic group from the Tanga region of Tanzania, and the Rabai and Giriama who are part of the larger Mijikenda community along the Kenya Coast.

Among the various traditional and contemporary brews in Taita-Taveta, *Mbangara* stands out as a complex cultural icon. Community members sometimes refer to it as *Mwasina*, giving the brew a dual identity that symbolizes both behaviours associated with its consumption and cultural adaptation. While “*Mwasina*” is a Taita name highlighting the brew’s key ingredient—the ripe and dried sausage fruit (*Kigelia africana*)— “*Mbangara*” on the other hand derives from a Taita word *Kubangarisha*, a term describing the temporary insanity and loss of stable posture often observed in those who consume it. By using these names interchangeably, people reveal the brew’s dual nature as both a cultural artifact rooted in local tradition and a powerful social force that shapes behaviour and identity.



Figure 10: Sausage fruit processes. **Left:** Sausage tree (*Kigelia africana*) with hanging fruits (image courtesy of San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance). **Centre:** Harvested sausage fruits drying under the sun. **Right:** A used sausage fruit, which undergoes multiple uses before disposal. Left photo from the internet; Centre photo from social media; and Right photo by Marura, November 2023.

Community members originally brewed *Mbangara* not for daily drinking or economic gain, but for ceremonies such as ancestral rites, blessings, and community celebrations. In these settings, *Mbangara* held a respected place as a social and ritual beverage. Only elders drank it, usually in the evenings, with a measured respect for the occasion. Community leaders prohibited younger people and women from drinking it, controlling access to mark *Mbangara* as a culturally revered brew. Families passed down the practice through generations, with brewing

knowledge often inherited. In one of the in-depth interviews I conducted, a woman in her early 40s who brews *Mbangara* reflected on this generational transfer of knowledge: “*Our mothers learned from their mothers, and so we do the same. Brewing is not just about the drink, it is about knowing when and why to make it, and who it is meant for. My children already know how to help and will know how to brew properly when the time comes.*” This quote captures how families pass on the values and techniques of *Mbangara* brewing, preserving the drink’s heritage for future generations.

Mbangara’s unique combination of ingredients distinguishes it from other local brews like *Pasha*. Brewers make it by boiling and mixing maize chaff (often from pounded maize), water, sugar, and the ripe and dried fruits of the sausage plant. They then allow it to ferment naturally over at least three days, without adding yeast. This extended brewing process gives *Mbangara* its robust flavor and distinctive, intense effects, setting it apart from the quicker, more potent fermentation methods used in brews like *Pasha*. In the past, brewers used honey or sugarcane juice instead of sugar.

Mbangara’s shift from a ceremonial drink to a daily staple reflects broader societal changes within Taita-Taveta. Today, community members of all ages and genders drink *Mbangara* in various gathering spots. Patrons often justify *Mbangara* drinking as an assertion of cultural identity, frequently emphasizing that “it has been there since the time of our ancestors.” Many younger people view *Mbangara* drinking as a way to connect with Taita heritage, even though they disregard the traditional rules that limited alcohol to elder men on special occasions. In informal chats during observations at different drinking spaces, once young people opened up to speak to me about their drinking experiences, some youth claimed that *Mbangara* is “part of our identity” and “what our ancestors drank,” aligning their consumption with a sense of cultural pride. Besides, the drink seemed to be more popular in rural than urban areas with patrons being

from diverse demographic groups. Though from my discussions with them, I learn that younger individuals often engage with *Mbangara* for its affordability with 350ml cup sometimes priced as low as 30 Kenyan shillings.



Figure 11: *Mbangara Production Process. Left: Cooking Wishwa (maize chaff) in a cooking pan. Centre: Mixing ingredients in a bucket. Right: Mbangara served in a cup to a patron. Left & Centre photos by Marura, November 2023; Right photo by author, November 2023.*

Despite its cultural significance, *Mbangara* remains illegal under Kenyan law. However, there are provisions that allow its sanctioned use for culturally significant functions and community rituals, provided that community members seek permission from local authorities. For instance, people can apply for a temporary permit to brew *Mbangara* for specific rituals or ceremonies, such as funerals, weddings, or *Kutasa* invocations. In these instances, the drink returns to its traditional, respected role, and brewers follow established practices that prioritize ritual significance over commercial interests.

The unlicensed production and sale of *Mbangara* have fostered an underground economy that operates at unconventional hours. Many of the brewers and sellers—predominantly women—begin as early as 3 a.m. to evade law enforcement. This covert approach has created a culture of connivance among these women, who employ strategic methods to avoid police raids. Some rely on networks of informants and security guards, while others use discreet packaging to

transport *Mbangara* undetected. For these women, who often depend on *Mbangara* sales for their primary income, these evasive strategies are essential for survival, underscoring the economic pressures that drive them to operate outside legal bounds. A 52-year-old woman seller in Voi explained to Marura, one of my research assistants, “If I get caught, I will lose everything. So, we operate early, and if police come, we are already gone.” This reality has prompted calls from many factions including community leaders, activists, and politicians to legalize the drink (Mnyamwezi, 2021).

Proponents of legalization argue that formalizing *Mbangara* could create a safer, regulated environment for brewers and consumers alike, while also generating county revenue. They point to *Mnazi*, a palm wine already legalized within coastal counties, as a model for integrating traditional brews into the regulated economy. Supporters within the county government advocate for licensing options, believing that controlled *Mbangara* production could reduce public health risks and promote cultural pride. At the same time, critics worry that legalizing *Mbangara* could lead to excessive drinking, especially among young people who already face limited employment opportunities.

Mbangara now stands at a cultural crossroads, embodying both the enduring values of Taita traditions and the dynamic shifts in social identity, economy and legality. As an actant, *Mbangara* influences individual lives, family dynamics, and community networks, linking the past to the present in ways that enrich and challenge Taita society.

Pasha – The Prohibited Drink of Choice

Pasha is a local brew—an opaque white alcoholic liquid that represents a unique yet controversial facet of local drinking culture, playing a complex role in social relations and community dynamics. I would describe it as an evolution of the traditional *Mbangara* or *Mwasina* brew, essentially a modern counterpart to *Mbangara*. It is a potent, illicitly brewed alcohol that embodies both the resilience and adaptability of local traditions under contemporary constraints. The name “*Pasha*” is a derivative from one of its key ingredients: yeast. *Pasha* serves as a brand name for a type of dry yeast inexpensively available in local shops within the county. Although many believe it is imported from neighboring Tanzania via the porous borders in Taveta, the yeast is manufactured in Turkey and widely distributed worldwide, especially throughout Asia and Africa (Dosumaya, n.d.).



Figure 10: Pasha Materialities. Left: A patron holds up a cup filled with Pasha, an opaque white liquid. Right: Pasha brand instant yeast, a primary ingredient for producing Pasha alcohol. Left photo by Marura, January 2024; right photo is from the internet.

As an evolution of *Mbangara*, *Pasha* combines traditional brewing knowledge with newer, accelerated methods that enable rapid production and distribution, ensuring its availability within a short timeframe. These quick production techniques make *Pasha* accessible yet illicit, reinforcing its deeply rooted place in the social fabric of Taita-Taveta. Observations

indicate that this type of alcohol is more available in informal urban settings than in rural areas. Meaning, the distribution networks for *Pasha* are predominantly urban, with greater availability in towns like Voi and Mwatate, while traditional *Mbangara* remains more common in rural areas.

Pasha is sold at prices between 20 and 50 Kenyan shillings (~ 0.2 – 0.5 USD) depending on the size of the serving cups, which range between 250ml to 500ml, attracting patrons with limited disposable income, including young men, day labourers, and older individuals seeking affordable alcohol. In the worst-case scenario, there are even options for KES 10 which is half of the 250 ml cup. This low cost and quick production cycle supports a culture of daily drinking, providing temporary relief and community for those experiencing economic instability. *Pasha* dens are typically located in inconspicuous residential areas, backyards, and sheds, operating on a system of trust where only regular patrons can easily purchase the drink. This covert and selective nature of these spaces reflects what cultural theorists Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe as *fugitivity*—a condition of evading visibility and mainstream regulation while creating spaces of autonomy (Harney & Moten, 2013). Through their elusiveness and reliance on trusted networks, these dens not only reinforce the drink's illicit status and exclusivity but also embody a form of resistance, challenging the boundaries of legal and social control.

The production process of *Pasha* is marked by its speed and secrecy, taking only a few hours to complete. People often describe the brewing period as short, averaging about three to four hours, unlike traditional brews that take several days. Brewers, primarily women, closely guard their brewing methods, processes and spaces, refusing to share details even with trusted patrons. This secrecy underscores the risks they face in an environment of constant surveillance and law evasion. *Pasha*'s ingredients are locally sourced and include water, sugar, yeast, and

maize chaff or bran, locally known as *Wishwa*¹⁹, a by-product of maize flour milling or pounding. *Wishwa* adds to the drink's thickness and alcohol content, being economical and readily available at local mills. Combined, these ingredients create a white, cloudy liquid with a distinct taste—slightly sweet and somewhat earthy—that is affordable and quick to produce, making it accessible to locals, particularly in urban areas.

The brewing methods remain largely opaque, shielded from public view and known only to select insiders. This secrecy around production, coupled with improvised consumption settings, adds to the illicit allure of *Pasha*. Patrons often consume it in minimalistic, makeshift drinking spots, typically using simple or easy-to-dispose serving items to avoid significant losses during potential raids by law enforcers—mainly area chiefs and police. The clandestine nature of *Pasha* drinking spaces reflects the tension between the demand for this beverage and its criminalized status. *Pasha* spaces are inherently temporary, with minimal infrastructure mirroring both the drink's illicit status and its flexible, transient nature. Drinking spots are often located under trees, in open clearings, or in sparsely furnished rented rooms, with patrons standing or sitting on the ground, tires, stones, or wooden benches. Durable seating is rare, as patrons and brewers avoid items that could lead to incrimination during a raid. Patrons position themselves strategically, constantly scanning for signs of law enforcement, ready to disband at the first indication of a raid. This defensive spatial arrangement reflects the mental readiness of *Pasha* consumers and sellers, who depend on local networks to warn them of approaching officials. *Pasha* dens can be dismantled within moments during a raid, with drinkers dispersing and containers quickly hidden, underscoring the adaptability and vigilance of the community.

¹⁹ Historically, *Wisha* was a by-product of manually pounded maize using a pestle and mortar. However, this process has gradually shifted, with *Wisha* now commonly produced as a by-product of maize processed through electric or petrol-powered milling machines. There are also concerns that some may be sourced from agricultural-veterinary retail shops, where it is sold as animal feed.

Motorbike riders for hire, also popularly known as *Boda-Boda* riders, play a crucial role in *Pasha*'s distribution. They navigate hidden routes to deliver the drink across the area while avoiding law enforcement. These riders form a mobile and adaptive network that ensures *Pasha*'s steady supply, even under close surveillance. Their ability to transport *Pasha* discreetly reflects the local community's ingenuity and resilience in sustaining this illicit economy. Besides, these same riders equally constitute part of the local warning network as they often position themselves at strategic points within the communities while they wait for potential passengers.



Figure 11: *Materials in a Pasha Drinking Space. Left: A used car tire and tree log repurposed as seating for patrons. Center: A damaged 5-litre jerrycan, destroyed during a raid by the area chief and other local leaders. Right: New plastic cups purchased to replace those lost in the raid. All photos by Marura, January 2024*

Pasha's primary consumers are often young men and low-wage workers, many of whom have transitioned from stable employment to more precarious work or unemployment. Patrons in these drinking spaces report finding solace in *Pasha*, which provides an escape from economic pressures and an informal community. The shared space around *Pasha* fosters a sense of friendship, where patrons exchange stories of struggle, humor, and mutual support. For many, the drink serves as both a morning necessity and an evening leisure, highlighting a cycle of

dependency. Younger men, in particular, consume *Pasha* continuously throughout the day, using it to “*Toa Lock*” (manage withdrawal symptoms) and maintain functionality, signaling a troubling pattern of addiction.

From media reports such as a story carried in the Standard Newspaper (Mnyamwezi, 2022), and a general community perspective I picked during informal chats and in-depth interviews, *Pasha*’s widespread consumption raises significant concerns. The drink’s high potency and lack of regulation contribute to various health risks, compounded by its affordability and accessibility. The rapid brewing process leaves little room for quality control, increasing the risk of contamination, while improvised ingredients like *Wishwa* pose potential hazards if handled improperly. From interviews and informal conversations during ethnographic fieldwork, many people reported observing cases of facial swelling or bloating among regular drinkers, attributing these symptoms to what some of my interlocutors describe as high potency and unknown contents of *Pasha*, which is brewed in an unregulated manner. In this community, swollen faces are widely recognized as visible markers of heavy *Pasha* consumption, serving as social indicators of excessive or prolonged use. Health concerns reflect anxieties about the rapid brewing process and the possibility of harmful additives. Community members speculate that *Pasha*’s quick production and lack of standardized ingredients result in inconsistencies in alcohol strength and purity, potentially causing toxic effects on the body. The combination of *Wishwa*, sugar, and popular *Pasha* yeast heightens the drink’s potency, though there is also concern about potential adulteration with low-cost but harmful substances, which some associate with the swelling seen in habitual drinkers.

Many patrons, particularly young men, engage in “*Kutoa Lock*” each morning, drinking *Pasha* to stave off withdrawal symptoms. This dependency cycle has notable health and economic repercussions, straining personal finances and family relationships by diverting

income toward alcohol at the expense of household needs. Conversations with various community members, including healthcare workers, *Nyumba Kumi* representatives, and community policing members, report a rise in alcohol dependency cases among young men, exacerbated by limited access to addiction treatment resources. *Pasha*'s availability reinforces a cycle of social isolation and economic hardship.

Insights from my ethnographic fieldwork, alongside reports from news media, reveal that efforts to regulate *Pasha* through law enforcement have seen limited success. Anecdotal reports and narratives from the media show that police raids are usually sporadic, and a complex relationship between brewers and law enforcement officials further exists which often complicates these efforts. While some local leaders, like chiefs, take community complaints seriously, complaints often focus on police officers who, reportedly, accept small bribes from brewers, allowing *Pasha* production and sale to continue unchecked. This informal tolerance reveals a dual layer of illegality—firstly in *Pasha*'s illicit nature, and secondly through the corruption that perpetuates its presence in the community. The transient and flexible setup of *Pasha* dens further hinders enforcement. Brewers and patrons adapt to regulation attempts, creating intricate networks that help them evade detection while maintaining a steady supply. Stories circulate of *Pasha* being brewed in unlikely places such as toilets, bushes, in the farms, underground tunnels dug in homes, rainwater-created natural gullies (locally known as *Makorongo*), on hills, and in sisal plantations. In a conversation one afternoon with one of the members of a community policing committee, he described some of the unlikely places they have found *Chang'aa* production:

We usually destroy more than 200 or 300 litres. There was some we found up there [pointing at a distant hill] somewhere called XX, up on top of the hill. It was in a big drum, more than 500 litres, and we destroyed it. They brew it up there in the hills. Once they boil it, they package it in bottles like this one [referring to a 500 ml water bottle] or one-litre bottles or five litres and bring it to town.

These adaptive practices reflect the resilience and fugitivity of *Pasha*'s production and distribution systems, sustained by economic necessity and the disenfranchisement of marginalized communities.

In Taita-Taveta, *Pasha* serves as both an economic lifeline and a significant public health hazard, embedded within the lives of its patrons and producers. This substance mirrors broader socio-economic conditions, representing both resilience and the challenges faced by marginalized communities. *Pasha*'s concealed production, transient consumption spaces, and vigilant social dynamics highlight a material culture of evasion and adaptation. It underscores how marginalized communities leverage material and social adaptations to navigate systemic neglect and economic marginalization. *Pasha* acts as more than an intoxicant—it is a medium for community identity, collective resistance, and the survival of informal economies amid structural inequality. Through the lens of *Pasha*, we see a nuanced intersection of socio-economic survival strategies and public health challenges, offering unique insights into the adaptive resilience of communities shaped by illicit economies and health disparities.

Chang'aa: The Potent Spirits

Chang'aa, locally known as *cham* in Taita-Taveta, is a potent distilled spirit with broad appeal across Kenya. Often referred to as “kill me quick,” it is notorious for its exceptionally high alcohol content, delivering a swift and powerful intoxication. The name *Chang'aa* derives from the Swahili term meaning “to remove,” reflecting its effects on inhibitions, consciousness, and, in severe cases, even life itself. With an alcohol concentration often reaching or exceeding 40%, it rivals commercial spirits in strength, making it particularly hazardous given its informal production. Unlike traditional Taita brews like *Mbangara*, which are valued for ceremonial

purposes, *Chang'aa* is a commercial adaptation ingrained in local social practices due to its affordability and potency.



Figure 12: *A plastic tumbler, half full of Chang'aa—a clear, water-like local spirit—sitting on a bench, served for a patron. Photo by David, November 2023*

This clear, water-like liquid is easily concealed, and the absence of color allows brewers and sellers to store it in all manner of containers. To avoid detection, *Chang'aa* is often transferred into repurposed commercial spirits bottles, water bottles, and even tea flasks²⁰—an especially effective tactic, as tea flasks are common and innocuous in Taita-Taveta. This creative concealment enables sellers to evade law enforcement, underscoring the adaptive tactics used to protect their livelihood.

Chang'aa's role in Taita-Taveta is multi-dimensional. Lacking cultural or ritual roots, it has nonetheless woven itself into the socio-economic fabric of the region, serving as both an

²⁰ This information is known even to police and other law enforcers, who even showed me some samples of these, as exhibits they were holding for cases already in court.

income source and a focal point for social gatherings. Production typically takes place in informal, sometimes clandestine setups that vary according to community resources. The process begins with fermenting maize chaff for several days, after which the fermented mixture is distilled by boiling. Vapors are condensed into a highly concentrated alcoholic liquid, with minimal to no quality control. Brewers often work in unsanitary conditions and, in some cases, may use hazardous additives like methanol to enhance potency, introducing significant health risks.



Figure 13: *Outdoor seating area outside a Chang'aa joint, featuring makeshift wooden benches under a tree and a parked motorbike for a regular patron – a boda boda rider.*
Photo by David, November 2023.

The appeal of *Chang'aa* lies in its strength and affordability, setting it apart from other local brews in Taita-Taveta. With alcohol content that can surpass 40%, it attracts consumers—especially youth and individuals prone to problem drinking—who seek an intense experience at a low cost. A 250ml bottle typically costs between 150 (~ \$1.2 USD) and 180 (~ \$1.4 USD) Kenyan Shillings, though smaller portions are available in half bottles for around 80 (~ \$0.6 USD) shillings or in *goblets* (small shots) for as little as 30 shillings (~ \$0.2 USD). This pricing

flexibility allows even those with limited income to purchase it, often even on credit. Barter arrangements are also common, with patrons trading services such as firewood collection or goods like vegetables in exchange for alcohol.

Widely accessible in urban and semi-urban centers like Voi and Mwatate, *Chang'aa* is typically consumed in open spaces. These informal drinking zones are outfitted with fixed, makeshift wooden benches, creating communal areas where patrons gather to drink and socialize. Other substances, including *Muguka* (khat) and cigarettes, are commonly sold alongside, reinforcing these spaces as hubs of multi-substance use.

The distribution network heavily involves *Boda-Boda* (motorbike) riders who transport the brew from hidden or remote production sites to urban drinking areas. Unlike brewers of *Pasha* and *Mbangara*, *Chang'aa* producers often do not sell directly; the brewing requires larger equipment and is generally done in concealed locations to avoid detection. Once produced, it is delivered to sellers in more accessible areas, and in some cases, this supply chain involves family members, making it a family business of sorts. Despite its potency and availability, *Chang'aa* operates in a legal grey zone, where its production and sale are officially prohibited but inconsistently policed. From our observations during the time of fieldwork and informal conversations with community members, law enforcement periodically conducts raids on *Chang'aa* dens, pouring out supplies and arresting brewers, yet these raids are often short-lived interruptions. Sellers resume operations soon after, bolstered by a system of regular bribes paid to police officers, who in return avoid disrupting the business. Tight-knit networks between sellers and patrons also allow for timely alerts of impending raids; sellers frequently advise patrons to stay away on certain days or to purchase takeaway bottles instead, minimizing the impact of these interruptions.



Figure 14: Patrons and a seller seated on makeshift benches outside a *Chang'aa* joint, leisurely drinking and engaging in conversation. Photo by David, November 2023.

The practice of sharing *Chang'aa* is a common social norm; patrons frequently offer drinks to one another as a form of mutual support. This communal drinking culture serves as a coping mechanism, allowing patrons to “save for a rainy day,” with the expectation that others will reciprocate when they lack funds. Children are often present in these spaces, positioned strategically to act as informal surveillance, alerting patrons and sellers to approaching law enforcement. This inclusion of children highlights the embedded nature of *Chang'aa* within the community.

Despite its prominence, *Chang'aa* remains controversial, seen by some as an economic lifeline and by others as a social menace. To sellers it is an economic support for families even when many elders and community leaders view it as a destructive force, contributing to family instability, addiction, and social disintegration. They contrast it with *Mbangara*, a more culturally accepted drink, seeing *Chang'aa* as a catalyst for negative behaviours, particularly

among the youth. Its unregulated production and communal drinking practices reveal the complex interplay between survival, socialization, and addiction within the community.

Spirits and Beers: The Contextualized Affordability to Fit the Taita Drinking Landscape

In Taita-Taveta, commercial alcohol primarily divides into spirits (distilled alcoholic beverages) and beers, with further informal categorization by price, potency, and intended effect. This division reflects both practical and social logic. Spirits, often termed “*makali*,” “*vikali*,” or “hard liquor” due to their high alcoholic content (typically ranging between 40-50% or even higher), include brands like Chrome Vodka, Chrome Gin, and Kenya Cane from East African Breweries Limited (EABL), as well as County Brandy from Kenya Wine Agencies (KWAL). Beers, on the other hand, have a much lower alcoholic content, around 4% to 6%, and include local favorites such as Tusker, Guinness, Balozi, and Senator Keg, all from EABL, along with a few imported brands when available. These commercial alcohols are sold in bars/pubs, bar and restaurant establishments, and nightclubs (selling both beers and spirits), and Wines and Spirits retail shops (Selling the spirits). The type of license applied for and approved dictates the kind of establishment. Both spirits and beers play distinctive roles in Taita-Taveta’s social fabric and contribute to broader themes of alcohol consumption and the local drinking culture. They are more prevalent in the urban centers of Voi and Mwatate sub-counties, where from observations, outlets often operate beyond official hours, reflecting a leniency in local enforcement that allows round-the-clock accessibility, especially for informal workers with unconventional schedules.

My observations and informal discussions from the field indicate that spirits like Chrome Vodka and Kenya Cane are widely consumed, particularly among younger demographics and informal workers such as *Boda-Boda* riders and ‘*manambas*’ (individuals who assist with in attracting and boarding passengers within the Kenyan public transportation system).

Consumption patterns lean towards hard liquors due to their high alcohol content and affordability in smaller quantities, often sold in shots or “tots” to suit tighter budgets.



Figure 15: *Display shelves in a local bar featuring primarily a variety of spirit brands, along with a few beers, empty keg jugs and mugs, and a keg barrel on the ground. Photo by author, October 2023.*

Although the law prohibits the sale of spirits in quantities less than 250 ml, sellers report they feel compelled to sell in these quantities to meet clients’ affordability. According to the Alcoholic Drinks Control Act of 2010, spirits must be packaged in glass bottles of at least 250 ml. Various brands are also distributed through wines and spirits outlets, which in the urban areas of Mwatate and Voi are strategically located, to attract patrons from transit hubs and busy markets. Additionally, proximity to Tanzania is believed to introduce external sources, with occasional smuggling across the border enhancing the variety of available brands.

Regarding beers, these are often seen as a more “social” choice. They are sold largely in bars and appeal to slightly older patrons and those seeking a longer, more gradual drinking experience. Senator Keg stands out as the most popular beer consumed in Taita-Taveta,

primarily due to its affordability. It is often served in 300 ml and 500 ml mugs for individual drinking or larger communal jugs (about 2 litres) when shared among friends. The jug format encourages shared drinking, which serves as a bonding activity among patrons.



Figure 16: Popular and impounded spirits in Taita Taveta. **Left:** A 250ml bottle of Chrome Vodka, one of the region's most popular spirit brands. **Right:** A 250ml bottle of Half Loaf Vodka held at a police station after being impounded for smuggling from Tanzania into the county. Photos by author. Left, October 2023; Right, February 2024.

In most bar spaces, beer drinking sessions foster a sense of community, providing patrons with a social venue to unwind, discuss issues, and forge connections. However, beer consumption is generally limited by higher prices relative to spirits, except for Senator Keg. A 500 ml Keg mug is sold at 70 KES (~ \$0.6 USD), a 300 ml mug at 50 KES (~ \$0.4 USD), and a jug at 200 KES (~ \$1.6 USD). Keg is distributed to bars by EABL local distributors in 50-liter barrels, which are connected to a tapped pump for easy siphoning into jugs and mugs. Moreover, Keg was introduced in Kenya around 20 years ago, intended as a low-cost beer to serve as an alternative to illicit brews, which at the time were associated with high rates of alcohol poisoning, health complications, and even fatalities. Other bottled beers, such as Tusker and

Guinness, are generally priced between 250 (~ \$2 USD) and 300 (~ \$2.4 USD) shillings per bottle, limiting accessibility to those who can afford them. Even in formal establishments, there is an informal economy for regular patrons; some venues offer alcohol on credit or hold patrons' phones as collateral—a practice locally known as *Kuweka Rehani*—until they settle their bills.

In comparing spirits and beers, we observed that the tendency to “*Toa Lock*” also called “*Kuzimua*,” which translates to “switching on” or “igniting,” is most commonly associated with spirits. These are discreetly sold and consumed in small quantities during morning hours at various outlets. Men make up the majority in these spirit and beer-selling establishments, while women drink more discreetly and often opt for smaller quantities or “tots” of spirits. During the festive season, distributors and bar owners prepare by stocking additional supplies, particularly of fast-selling brands, to meet increased demand as many customers celebrate by buying in bulk. Premium beers and imported spirits signify economic achievement or aspiration, making them popular among wealthier patrons or for special occasions.



Figure 17: Keg beer at a local bar. **Left:** Multiple barrels of keg beer chained together outside the bar. **Center:** A keg barrel inside the bar, equipped with a dispensing pipe and tap. **Right:** A half-full Senator jug of keg beer on the table, shared by two patrons—one using a mug and the other a tumbler. Left photo by author, August 2023; Centre photo by Marura, October 2023; Right phot by author, October 2023.

Table 1 below summarizes some of these characteristics. It provides a comprehensive summary of the diverse alcohol types that emerged as popular in Taita-Taveta, detailing their unique characteristics, legal status, production methods, cultural roles, safety perceptions, primary user demographics, and pricing dynamics.

Alcohol Types as Active Actants

Drawing from the roles of different types of alcohol as seen in Taita-Taveta's cultural and social life, each type—whether it's *Mnazi*, *Pasha*, *Chang'aa*, or commercial spirits—brings distinctive realities into existence with and for its users. As these alcohol types circulate within various spaces, they don't merely exist as passive commodities. They actively shape, enable, and at times constrain the behaviour of their consumers, reflecting the idea that alcohol is a force that “does things” within different social worlds. In this framing, Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory is instrumental, as it posits that objects or substances, like alcohol, participate in shaping networks of relationships and outcomes. Here, alcohol “acts” not as a neutral entity but as an agent with significant influence, similar to how Latour describes objects as mediators rather than intermediaries—meaning they actively transform rather than merely transmit meanings and effects (Latour, 2005). *Mnazi*, for instance, serves as an actant by fostering a unique social cohesion through its identity as “*Pombe ya Heshima*,” a drink respected for its social acceptability, thus playing a part in community bonding and regulating behaviour among its patrons.

Similarly, Arjun Appadurai's concept of the “social life of things” (Appadurai, 1988) supports this view by showing how objects, like types of alcohol, gain meanings within social contexts. In Taita-Taveta, *Pasha* and *Chang'aa* circulate in covert networks, where their illicit nature shapes drinking spaces and social interactions with a distinct atmosphere of vigilance and

evasion. Appadurai's work helps explain how these beverages are more than commodities; they accumulate meanings that influence user behaviours, spaces, and community dynamics.

In these ways, each type of alcohol "acts" differently across contexts, shaping not only the immediate social interactions but also the broader patterns of consumption and dependency among Taita-Taveta's residents. This coincides with Tim Ingold's notion of the "meshwork," where he describes that agency is distributed across human and non-human elements in complex interconnected ways. He argues that "agency [is not concentrated] in human hands, but rather ... distributed around all the elements that are connected or mutually implicated in a field of action" (Ingold, 2010, p.11). Each alcohol type, therefore, whether licit like *Mnazi* or illicit like *Pasha*, demonstrates a meshwork of relationships that entangles patrons, sellers, law enforcers, and the substances themselves in ongoing negotiations of use, survival, and legality.

Actancy in Practice: Alcohol's Enactment in the Lives of Young Users

The diverse roles that alcohol plays in Taita-Taveta—whether as a respectable social beverage, an illicit escapist brew, or an intense communal intoxicant—extend to its impact on young people's daily lives and identities. To illustrate the complex ways in which alcohol operates as an actant in these lives, I followed the experiences of five young people whom others perceived as having problematic drinking behaviours, although some of them do not view their drinking as problematic. Their stories, told using pseudonyms that all begin with "Mwa" to capture the Taita naming identity, reveal how different types of alcohol uniquely – and sometimes contradictorily – shape their routines, relationships, and coping mechanisms. Through these narratives, we see how alcohol, as an active performative agent, shapes the challenges and dynamics they navigate in their communities.

Thus, by observing how alcohol functions in these young people's lives, we see not only the individual effects but also how alcohol reinforces or challenges broader societal structures. This resonates with Teresa Brennan's (2004) theory of affect transmission, which suggests that emotions and experiences are not contained within individuals but circulate in a shared field between people and objects. Alcohol, as experienced by young people in Taita-Taveta, acts as a conduit for transmitting collective challenges—economic instability, social isolation, and identity struggles—creating a complex network of influence that shapes both individual and communal experiences.

Table 4: A summary of common types of alcohol within Taita-Taveta drinking landscape

Alcohol Type	Local Name (aka)	Legal Status	Key Characteristics	Production Method	Cultural Significance	Safety Perceptions	Primary Users	Pricing
Local Alcohol	Mbangara (Mwasina)	Illegal	Brownish liquid	Fermented naturally, no yeast used; often brewed in concealed areas	Used in social gatherings and rites; perceived as heritage	Seen as safer due to natural ingredients, but unregulated	Primarily consumed by older men, some youth interested in tradition	Affordable, varies by availability
	Pasha	Illegal	White liquid, quick fermentation	Secretive, rapid fermentation; outside regulated channels	Primarily recreational; associated with rapid intoxication	High risk due to unknown methods; linked with illness	Youth and low-income urban patrons	Cheap, accessible to low-income individuals
	Mnazi (Palm Wine)	Legal in Coastal region	Pale, fizzy, slightly sweet, low alcohol	Collected from tapped palm trees; naturally fermented	Important in social functions; widely recognized as cultural	Considered safer due to natural origin; minor health risks if fresh	Broad demographic; consumed by men and women in social contexts	Low-cost, varies by season and availability
	Chang'aa (Kill Me Quick)	Illegal	Strong, clear, distilled spirit	Distilled with homemade equipment, often in hidden settings	Predominantly recreational; symbol of defiance in some communities	Seen as dangerous; linked to health issues and blindness	Wide demographic, especially low-income communities	Low, varies with availability and demand
Factory Alcohol	Spirits (Makali)	Legal if licensed	Branded, high alcohol content, varies in strength and flavor	Produced in factories under controlled processes	Primarily recreational; status marker for younger adults	Considered relatively safer due to standardized production	Young adults, urban and suburban areas	Mid-range to high, brand dependent
	Beers	Legal	Branded, lighter alcohol content	Produced in factories with strict quality controls	Recreational; associated with social gatherings	Generally considered safe due to regulation	Middle-aged to older adults, social drinkers	High pricing, brand-dependent

A Companion in the Struggle: Mwakidu's Bond with Alcohol

I first met Mwakidu one late morning while doing my fieldwork. He was first introduced to one of my research assistants by a bartender at one of the observation sites and then later to me. At 26, Mwakidu navigates life in Mwatate, Taita-Taveta, amid missed opportunities, family conflicts, and an unrelenting reliance on alcohol. Despite a promising start—attending a respected high school and a tertiary institution—he finds himself trapped in a cycle of alcohol dependence, shaped by a complex web of familial and social dynamics. Single and living alone, Mwakidu occupies a small room within a family-owned property. He guards this space closely, rarely allowing anyone to enter. Even when his friends help him get home on nights when he is severely drunk, he dismisses them before reaching his door, ensuring his solitude. This guarded privacy reflects a complex relationship with his surroundings, both his protective instincts and an apparent need for isolation.

Mwakidu's daily routine revolves around his need for alcohol, primarily Keg beer and *Chang'aa*. Each morning, he lights a cigarette and heads to a local bar where he cleans to earn his first drink—a morning cup of Keg that he calls his way to “*Toa Lock*.” “*I need that first drink in the morning to open my head. Without it, I can't think straight*,” he explains, highlighting how alcohol shapes his routine and enables him to face each day.

Without a steady job, Mwakidu relies on small tasks at the bars, such as cleaning and managing the pool table, to earn just enough for his drinks. “*Once I finish cleaning, they pay me, and I buy two cups of Keg*,” he says, viewing these tasks as steps in his drinking routine. By late afternoon, he seeks stronger effects and heads to a friend's joint, where he drinks *Chang'aa* on credit when he lacks cash. Alcohol provides him temporary relief and a sense of control, though he admits, “*Drinking makes me feel tipsy, so I can forget... and assume everything is okay*.”

Physically, Mwakidu is sturdy and muscular, traits that make him appear healthy at first glance. Yet, when sober, his hands often shake, and he breaks into frequent sweats—a visible consequence of his dependence. His demeanor shifts noticeably in his sober moments: withdrawn and timid, he hardly speaks and avoids eye contact. The occasional cheerfulness he shows when intoxicated vanishes, replaced by a quiet and guarded presence. This marked contrast hints at his reliance on alcohol as a way to express himself, or perhaps as a means to mask underlying distress.

Family expectations weigh heavily on Mwakidu, particularly his father's disappointment over his drinking. Saddened by his son's situation, his father recalls sharing his own struggles with alcohol in the hope that it would deter Mwakidu from a similar fate. *"I feel very bad,"* he says. *"I see him heading down the same path I once took, and it pains me."* Yet, despite these warnings, Mwakidu feels let down by family members, especially his seemingly well-off relatives, whom he believes could have helped him secure a job. However, he also confesses that he has not asked for their help, feeling ashamed to admit he no longer has his certificates, which were destroyed in one of his many drinking episodes. This sense of shame and isolation further fuels his drinking, reinforcing his dependence on alcohol as both a distraction and a transient source of comfort.

Alcohol shapes not only Mwakidu's personal life but also his social connections. At the bar, he connects with others who share similar struggles, forming a network that sustains them through difficult times. Together, they pool resources to buy shared drinks and exchange cigarettes. *"We've been friends since we were young,"* he explains. *"We were spoiled together, and now, we're all in this."* Their shared experiences of struggle and survival strengthen bonds that alcohol deepens, even as it magnifies their individual hardships.

Mwakidu's reliance on alcohol goes beyond mere habit; it becomes a way to escape the pain of missed opportunities and unmet potential. "*Drinking lets me forget,*" he admits. "*For a little while, everything feels okay.*" Although he sometimes tries to "behave" for his girlfriend or at family gatherings, he inevitably returns to the bar, where alcohol and familiar faces provide a comforting, albeit temporary, refuge. For Mwakidu, alcohol is more than a drink—it is an active force, shaping his days, structuring his social world, and offering reprieve from life's frustrations. "*If I don't drink Chang'aa, I feel bad. I can't even sleep,*" he says, showing how deeply alcohol controls his physical and emotional well-being.

In Mwakidu's world, alcohol entangles with every aspect of his life, influencing his identity and mediating his relationships. His story illustrates alcohol's role as an actant—an influence that drives not only his personal choices but also his broader social existence. This reliance speaks to the deeper dynamics of socio-economic pressure and personal disillusionment that pervade his daily life. Through his journey, we see how alcohol becomes an active participant, framing both his daily struggles and his brief moments of solace.

Trapped in Familiarity: Mwakucha's Alcohol-Shaped Realities

A tall, dark-complexioned man in his late 30s, Mwakucha tells a story of unexpected recovery—a journey from a life of alcohol dependency to sobriety within the familiar spaces of Voi. His story begins with what seemed a harmless substitution: he took up drinking to replace his addiction to miraa. "*For you to stop chewing miraa, you must start drinking a lot, so that it can replace miraa,*" he explains, reflecting on how he unknowingly replaced one dependency with another. This replacement soon dominated his life, and I witnessed this shift over the period I was doing my fieldwork, seeing him move from one drinking joint to another, crafting his daily routine around a network of spaces and faces that he returned to regularly.

Raised in Taita since childhood, he considers the region his home. His family moved to Taita for his father's work, and he built his life in Voi, where his entire family still resides. A father of three, Mwakucha attributes the dissolution of his marriage to his drinking. His wife left with their children, and he links this separation, as well as his job loss, to his descent into heavy drinking. He began with Guinness, a premium choice, but when he lost his job, he turned to cheaper alternatives—ultimately drinking whatever he could find. *“It went from spirits, to keg, and finally, to anything that could get me drunk,”* he admits.

Unlike Mwakidu, who gravitates toward specific choices such as Keg and *Chang'aa*, he drinks any type of alcohol available, from branded spirits to *Mnazi*, *Pasha*, *Mbangara*, and *Chang'aa*. Despite their differences in preference, both men experience similar consequences, with alcohol influencing their daily lives, social relationships, and family connections. Alcohol shapes both men's identities, leaving its mark on nearly every decision and interaction.

For him, the drinking dens of Voi serve as more than locations; they provide a sense of belonging. Each day, he rotates through various dens, returning to some multiple times, creating an escape from his daily struggles. *“This is where my friends are,”* he often remarks, acknowledging that, even after quitting, he can't entirely let go of these spaces. I observe this firsthand—day after day, he appears in one den or another, consistently making rounds to secure drinks or engage with his companions. Although he no longer drinks, he still visits, arriving later in the day and observing his former drinking partners. Watching them now, he reflects on the impacts he once ignored. *“I have realized this is poison,”* he says, acknowledging the toll alcohol took on his life. Patrons who knew him during his drinking days now find it ironic to hear him call alcohol “poison” and remind him, *“Look at him, now you want to call it poison after all those years?”* But he stands firm, pointing out, *“It put me down, almost led me to the grave.”*

Sobriety has shifted his perspective, making the behaviours he once embraced seem foreign and unsettling.

At the peak of his drinking, alcohol structured his entire day. He begins each morning performing small tasks to secure his first drink, relying on others to buy him a cup or allowing him to drink from their glasses if they briefly step away. Known for his audacity, he routinely drinks from unattended glasses, a habit so ingrained that when he quits drinking, patrons express surprise to find their drinks left untouched in his presence. This change, subtle yet significant, marks the shift in his behaviour and identity that I observe as he transitions from dependency to sobriety.

Alcohol doesn't serve as just a social habit for him; it becomes a physical necessity. His dependency manifests in the tremors that overtake him each morning until he can "remove the lock" with a drink. "*Kutoa Lock is like being a tea addict,*" he says, describing his need to drink first thing in the morning to combat the symptoms of withdrawal. "*I'd get to a point where I'd be shaking, couldn't hold a glass... because I hadn't drunk.*" On one occasion, his trembling becomes so severe that I have to hold a tumbler of *Mnazi* to his lips so he can drink and steady himself. Reflecting on those moments, he says, "*Everything can wait, but your body is demanding. You must 'Toa Lock,' and if there's no money, you'll sell anything—chicken, ducks—just to get a morning drink.*" With time, he realizes how deeply alcohol controls his body and mind, dictating his every choice.

Five months into my fieldwork, Mwakucha faces a turning point. Diagnosed with tuberculosis, he confronts a life-or-death decision. His doctor warns him that mixing alcohol with his medication could prove fatal, forcing him to stop drinking. Reflecting on this experience, he states, "*It's poison. It put me down, almost took me to the grave.*" With his health

on the line, he embraces sobriety. His transformation becomes visible almost immediately. His once swollen, unkempt face takes on a healthier appearance, and his clothes, once disheveled, appear clean and fresh. As he walks through Voi's streets, people who have known him for years do double-takes, struggling to reconcile this renewed image with the unsteady figure they remember. "*They say they can't believe it's me,*" he recalls, acknowledging the surprise and disbelief of former companions who had only known him in his years of drinking.

Sobriety offers him an opportunity to reevaluate his past choices and consider the broader impacts of his lifestyle. Now, with clarity, he reflects openly on the decisions that led to countless arrests, multiple stints in jail, and instances of petty theft—acts he once saw as necessary but now recognizes as part of a damaging cycle. "*It was stupid,*" he says, acknowledging how his desperation for alcohol led him into a network of poor decisions. His journey now gives him a renewed sense of responsibility, especially toward the youth of Voi. He expresses concern for young people entering the same dens he once frequented, fearing they may unknowingly walk a path similar to his.

"*If only they could see what alcohol will do to them,*" he says, hoping that his story might serve as a cautionary example. As he watches younger generations stumble through the same behaviours he once exhibited, he shares his experiences with a sense of urgency, hoping to prevent them from falling into the traps he spent years trying to escape.

Mwakucha's decision to quit drinking elicits mixed responses within his community. Those who once knew him as a constant presence in Voi's drinking dens now view him with a mix of admiration and skepticism. "*They congratulate me and agree, but this glass doesn't agree to be left,*" he observes, reflecting on the difficulty his former companions face when considering

sobriety. He continues to visit the dens, not as a participant, but as a quiet observer, now occupying a different role within these spaces.

Rather than joining the drinks and lively banter, he watches from the sidelines, reflecting on the effects of alcohol on the lives around him. “*Alcohol can destroy a family*,” he remarks, recounting stories of others who lost jobs, family members, and even their lives to excessive drinking. He often tells those still drinking, “*This is death; it is poison*,” although many laugh, reminding him of his own years as a heavy drinker. Yet he remains hopeful, believing his words might eventually resonate with those who once shared his struggles.

Even with a clear perspective on his past, he finds it challenging to completely disconnect from the drinking spaces he once called home. He acknowledges the emotional pull these places still hold, feeling an enduring bond with the friendships and sense of belonging that shaped his daily life. Although he now arrives later in the day, standing on the periphery rather than engaging directly, he understands the risks of staying too close.

As he observes the younger patrons, he reflects on how alcohol perpetuates cycles of hardship in communities like Voi. He knows firsthand the impact it had on his life and family, and he worries for the future of those who may fall into similar patterns. This reflection underscores his commitment to staying sober, serving as both a personal achievement and a statement of resilience. And from his journey, we see how alcohol shapes identities, alters routines, and influences relationships—often embedding itself so deeply that individuals struggle to separate from its influence. For him, alcohol acts as both an enabler and a disruptor, shaping his day-to-day existence, altering his relationships, and eventually catalyzing profound personal change.

The Daily Ritual with Chang’aa: Mwambisi’s Routine of Escape and Survival

He then mentioned that he was on his way to repair a pool at some pub in town, apologizing for the sudden interruption. I reassured him that it was no problem. So, as we headed towards the said pub, I led the way, but Mwambisi veered off towards the Chang'aa place behind his house. He explained that he needed a quick drink to clear his head before starting work, jokingly saying, 'Let me pass by just briefly to open my mind; I cannot work with an empty head.' I chuckled in response and agreed, 'Sure thing.'"
[Tuesday, February 20, 2024]

Mwambisi, a 36-year-old resident of a village in Mwatate sub-county, embodies the life of a dedicated *Chang'aa* drinker. His days, much like his choices, are shaped by his connection to this locally brewed spirit. For him, *Chang'aa* is more than just a drink—it is his daily comfort, his sustenance, and his currency. As pictured in the above scene captured in a field note by a research assistant while spending one of the days with Mwambisi, the unhurried, familiar steps into the *Chang'aa* dens reflect a routine developed over years of drinking in his neighborhood, a pattern deeply woven into his lifestyle.

His life centers on a predictable rhythm. He begins his day tending to his animals—chickens and goats—before venturing out to seek casual labor. Work is often transient, enough to earn just a little money or, on lean days, a barter arrangement for a bottle of *Chang'aa*. After work, he gravitates to the local drinking spots, where *Chang'aa*, *Pasha*, and *Mbangara* are sold openly. For Mwambisi, *Vitongojini* (local drinking dens) are a refuge from the struggles of daily life, a place where he and his friends can drink, talk, and briefly leave their troubles behind.

Chang'aa's appeal to him is practical and calculated. At 150 KES (~ 1.2 USD) per bottle, it costs him about 450 KES (~ \$3.6 USD) a day to consume his usual three bottles, totaling 750 ml. This quantity is enough to make him feel sufficiently drunk without lingering effects. He explains, “*Chang'aa doesn't give me a hangover, it's cheap, and you feel drunk quickly.*” Unlike *Pasha* and *Mbangara*, which require much larger quantities and more money to reach the same effect, *Chang'aa* offers a concentrated impact for its price. In Mwambisi's words, “*With Pasha, I*

need to drink about 3 liters, and with Mbangara, maybe even 5 liters, to get as drunk as with Chang'aa. Chang'aa just makes sense.”

While cost is a significant factor, Mwambisi's attachment to *Chang'aa* is also driven by its ability to keep him feeling active and alert. He mentions that it “*makes you eat more food,*” a quality he prefers over other brews that suppress his appetite. Drinking *Chang'aa* allows him to cook and eat heartily, a factor that aligns with his practical approach to drinking. Even when funds are tight, he can access it through small chores for local sellers, such as fetching water, or on credit, to be paid when he has money. This resourcefulness reflects his deep connection to the brew, which he can depend on daily.

For him, drinking is not only about escaping his problems; it is also a source of pride. His capacity to drink is well-regarded among his peers. While many struggle to handle even two bottles of *Chang'aa*, Mwambisi comfortably takes three bottles every day, a fact that earns him admiration among his friends. His drinking history, spanning nearly 18 years, began during a time of idleness when he found himself without work and surrounded by friends who drank. “*There is alcohol right at our doorsteps in the village,*” he says. This early and easy access allowed him to build a tolerance that has set him apart. Today, he drinks far more than many others around him, which he attributes to this early exposure. This endurance has become a source of pride; he receives praise for his high tolerance, and he admits that he enjoys the recognition it brings.

Yet, beneath the admiration, there lies a complex web of motivations and struggles. Mwambisi often recalls his desire to someday leave *Chang'aa* behind and transition to drinking branded alcohol, like Viceroy and Chrome. For him, these commercial brands represent a step up, their certified alcohol content and quality a mark of refinement and progress. However, he

views this aspiration as tied to his economic situation, believing that only steady employment or a sustainable livelihood, such as livestock rearing, would enable him to afford these drinks. Until then, he remains bound to *Chang'aa*, the drink he can rely on every day, even on credit.

His social circle, like his lifestyle, revolves around *Chang'aa*. His friends are locals with shared backgrounds and similar challenges. Each day, I watch as they gather in familiar spots, bringing with them a sense of mutual understanding forged through shared experiences. This connection to his friends and his drinking dens is as central to his routine as *Chang'aa* itself. The gatherings are marked by informal support systems; when Mwambisi doesn't have money, he knows his friends will buy him a drink, and when others lack funds, he returns the favor. It is a reciprocity that sustains his drinking habit as well as his sense of belonging.

Mwambisi's connection to these drinking spaces is, however, complicated by his desire for stability. On days when he has spare change, he may indulge in a cup of Keg beer in the evening. This small variation reflects his wish for a bit more comfort than *Chang'aa* alone provides, though even this is rare. He remains committed to his familiar places and routines, consistently returning to the same neighborhood drinking spots and, ultimately, to the home where he lives alone after separating from his wife.

Though he enjoys the freedom his life of casual labor and drinking affords him, he sometimes reflects on his drinking with a mixture of regret and helplessness. He often speaks of his son, now in Form 2, and the guilt that surfaces when he considers the impact of his choices on their relationship. "*There was a time I had to be carried home,*" he admitted. "*That wasn't fair to my son. It's not what I want him to see.*" For him, the recognition of this reality is painful, and it deepens his desire to curb his drinking. Yet, he feels trapped, citing the financial stress of school fees and his unstable employment as obstacles that keep him tethered to *Chang'aa*. His

dependence on the drink, therefore, remains an ever-present response to the burdens he faces, manifesting as both a coping mechanism and an obstacle.

Mwambisi occasionally envisions a future where he quits *Chang'aa* and turns to “better” alcohol like Viceroy or Chrome, which he associates with stability and responsibility. But these visions are tightly tied to the possibility of stable employment; a job that would keep him busy and provide a steady income. Without that, he fears he may never break the cycle. In these reflective moments, he also recognizes the toll his drinking takes on his relationships and his own self-image. His wish to change, though sincere, is undercut by the daily pressures he faces, which make *Chang'aa* a reliable way to cope with his life’s challenges. He clings to the hope that he can one day break free from it, though he acknowledges the difficulty of doing so without a concrete alternative.

His relationship with *Chang'aa* is one of interdependence. The drink is woven into his daily life, a reliable presence amid the uncertainties he faces. It is a tool, an identity, and a source of both pride and restraint. *Chang'aa* has shaped his community connections, his status among his friends, and his survival strategy. While Mwambisi occasionally entertains the hope of a life without it, his narrative remains tied to the present reality of financial strain, limited opportunity, and the comfort found in the familiar. In this way, *Chang'aa* functions as both a tether and a lifeline in Mwambisi’s world, its role as actant in his life underscoring the complex and resilient survival strategies that define life in Taita-Taveta.

The Interwoven Realities of Alcohol Actancy in Taita-Taveta

Mwakidu, Mwakucha, and Mwambisi's narratives vividly demonstrate alcohol's material presence among young people in Taita-Taveta, where it operates not merely as a consumable but as an influential actant with agency²¹. Following Latour's (2005) perspective that non-human entities actively participate within social networks, alcohol here emerges as a core actor—a dynamic force that organizes relationships and influences individual choices. The network diagrams below—Network Diagram 1 and Network Diagram 2—reinforce this role, illustrating alcohol's embeddedness within interconnected social, economic, cultural, and material domains

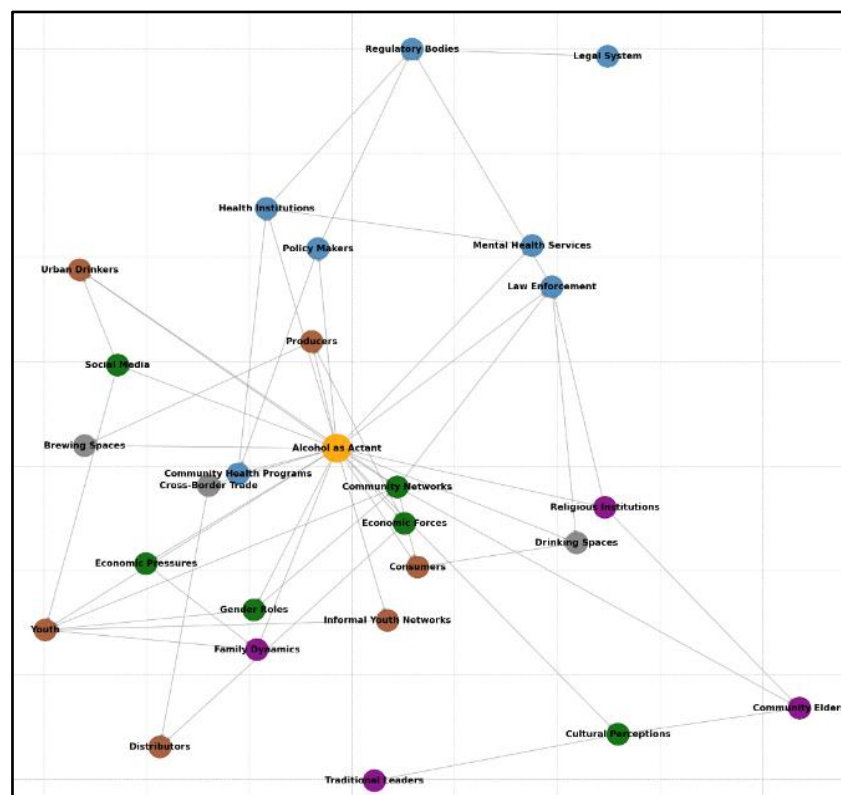


Figure 18: *Network Diagram 1 – showing the interconnectedness of alcohol and other human and non-human actors*

²¹ Alcohol's agency as an actant should, however, not be misconstrued as singular or deterministic. Instead, alcohol's effects and agency are always relational, contextually emerging, and co-produced through interactions with broader social, economic, political, and material assemblages. So here I position alcohol as one actant among many within dynamic, heterogeneous networks.

in Taita-Taveta. Alcohol, therefore, is not merely consumed; it is constitutive, shaping and reshaping the social interactions and structures surrounding it.

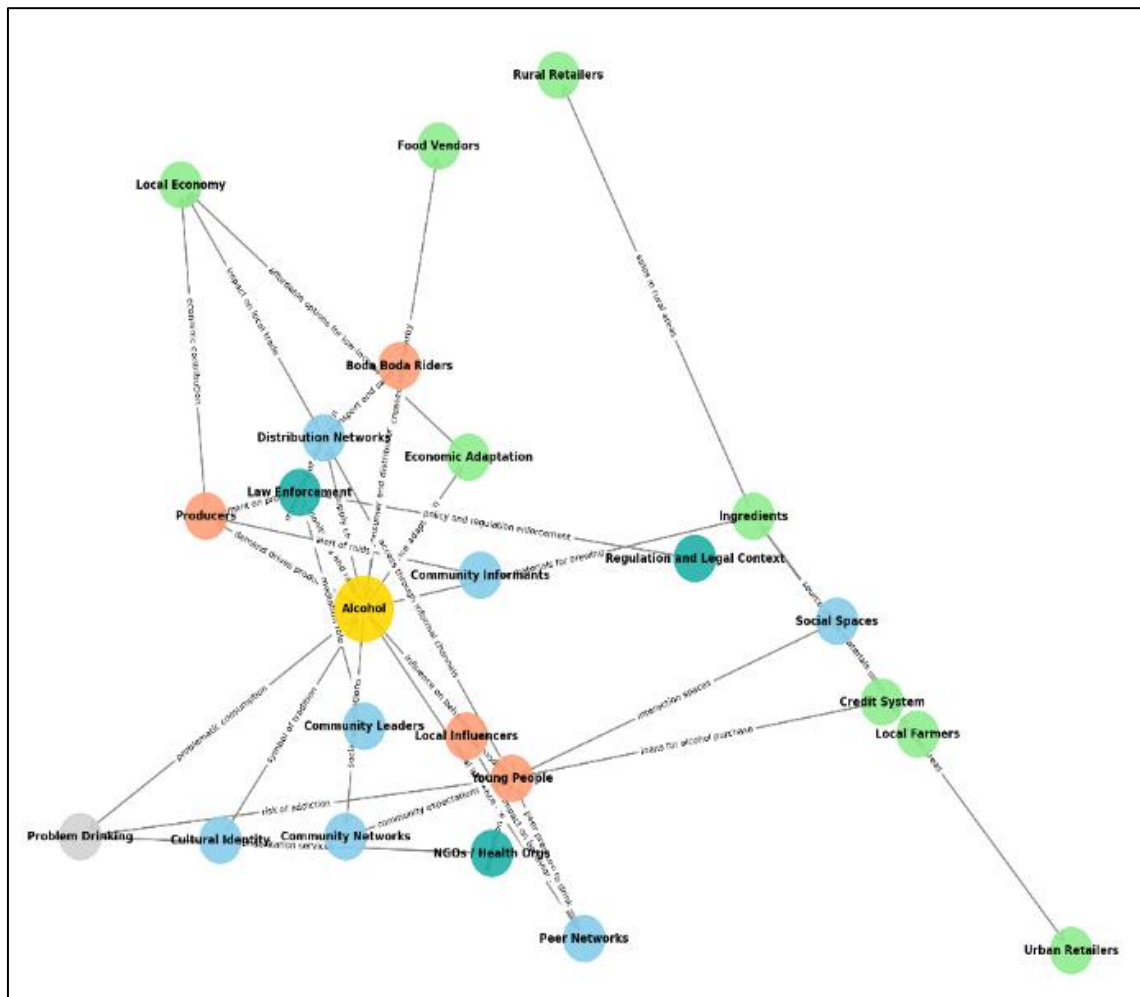


Figure 19: Network Diagram 2 – showing the interconnectedness of alcohol and other human and non-human actors, and how alcohol interacts with the different actors within this network.

These network diagrams visually illustrate Callon’s (1986) concept of “translation,” where alcohol, a non-human actor, serves as a mediator that binds together other human and non-human actors (Callon, 1984). In this instance, it connects youth, producers, and transporters with material objects, institutional forces, and economic systems, establishing a dynamic network. This interaction reflects Law and Mol’s view of “the actor-enacted,” (Law & Mol, 2008) where alcohol enacts various roles depending on its social use and the meanings attributed to it. In this

way, alcohol's presence is not passive but active, influencing informal economies, social bonds, and institutional responses.

Central to this network is alcohol's role as a mediator of social and cultural connections. Different forms of alcohol, such as *Mnazi*, *Chang'aa*, *Mbangara*, and *Pasha*, each occupy unique positions within Taita-Taveta's social structure. *Mnazi*, for instance, aligns with Appadurai's idea of the "social life of things" but also invites analysis through Mol's (2002) concept of "multiple enactments." *Mnazi* is often respected and culturally meaningful, symbolizing calm, communal gatherings. It stabilizes community networks, supporting relationships that reinforce social norms and customs. In this respect, *Mnazi* fulfills a stabilizing role similar to the idea of the "missing masses"—objects that, though seemingly mundane, contribute significantly to social organization (Latour & Butler, 1992).

In contrast, *Pasha* and *Chang'aa* fulfill a more intense and, at times, disruptive social function. These potent brews serve as coping mechanisms for marginalized youth, bridging gaps left by economic hardship and social exclusion. Here, alcohol operates as a "fluid" actor (Mol & Law, 1994), one that adjusts to the social and economic constraints of young people's lives. Network Diagram 2 captures this dynamic, illustrating *how* potent illicit brews likely create social bonds that offer both empowerment and dependency, enabling peer connections even as they deepen reliance on alcohol. Sayes (2014) further explains that non-human agents such as alcohol do not merely exist within networks; they actively shape relationships and affect individual lives.

Alcohol's influence extends economically, acting as an anchor in the informal economy. *Mnazi*, for example, links agricultural production with local distribution, thereby sustaining an array of informal labor, from farmers to local sellers. Alcohol's role here aligns with Latour's

(2005) perspective on the role of objects in sustaining and reshaping relations, embedding itself in Taita-Taveta's socio-economic landscape as an economic facilitator. Nimmo similarly argues that material objects in networks are integral to the socio-economic functioning of communities (Nimmo, 2011). Alcohol drives small-scale trade, supports local businesses, and sustains livelihoods in settings such as neighborhood and village shops, and food vendors. However, as Mol (2002) might describe and based on a more critical view of the actor network theory, alcohol enacts different realities for various actors: it sustains economic opportunities while also fostering dependency cycles among low-income consumers who rely on informal credit.

For lower-income groups, particularly with *Pasha* and *Chang'aa*, alcohol fosters cycles of economic dependency, where informal loans and bartering arrangements facilitate continuous consumption but also deepen financial strain. Mwambisi's experiences with *Chang'aa* reveal alcohol's dual role as both a coping tool and a form of currency, aligning with Graham Harman's (2009) exploration of objects as intrinsic actors within human relations. Alcohol's economic reach thus penetrates daily survival strategies and long-term financial stability, creating dependency loops that reinforce socioeconomic hardships and limit upward mobility.

Institutions, including law enforcement and health organizations, introduce further complexity into alcohol's network in Taita-Taveta. Efforts to regulate illicit brews like *Chang'aa* and *Pasha* often clash with resilient community networks, where local alert systems help evade enforcement. This process resonates with Moser's concept of interference (Moser, 2008), where institutional regulations confront and sometimes contradict the material-social fabric of local practices. These tensions highlight the interplay between regulatory efforts and local customs, where alcohol's embedded value resists formal limitations and continues to circulate within established social norms.

Health organizations encounter additional challenges as they attempt to counteract problem drinking in a cultural setting that normalizes alcohol use. Educational and rehabilitation programs struggle to counter deeply ingrained acceptance, especially when peer networks and generational patterns support drinking as a rite of passage. Mol's (2002) idea of multiple enactments illuminates this aspect of alcohol as a substance that simultaneously enables social bonding and fosters resilience against institutional intervention, highlighting alcohol's role in shaping generational identities and social cohesion.

The diverse roles of alcohol in Taita-Taveta emphasize its function as both a dependency and an identity marker. Through *Mnazi*, *Chang'aa*, *Mbangara*, and *Pasha*, individuals like Mwakidu, Mwakucha, and Mwambisi navigate their identities as community members, socio-economically marginalized youth, and individuals seeking agency. Alcohol here serves a dual function: it builds social connection, offers relief, and still traps individuals within dependency networks that restrict personal development. This dynamic reflects the "multiple enactments" of alcohol, where its influence is fluid, shifting roles in ways that alternately empower and restrict autonomy (Mol, 2002b).

For individuals like Mwakucha, who have moved away from heavy drinking, alcohol once symbolized social connection and coping but later came to represent personal loss. For others, such as Mwambisi, alcohol continues to sustain social bonds and routines despite its economic costs. This duality highlights alcohol's powerful affective force, where its presence bonds individuals to their communities yet entangles them in dependency. This speaks to Edwin Sayes' (2014) critical examination of ANT where he emphasizes recognizing non-human actors as having capacity to influence and transform social realities, and in the case of my dissertation,

is about how non-human agents like alcohol can reinforce both social ties and personal vulnerabilities, demonstrating alcohol's dual impact on individual lives.

In conclusion, alcohol's actancy permeates all facets of life in Taita-Taveta. The network diagrams illustrate alcohol's centrality, showing its integration of human and non-human actors across social, economic, material, and institutional dimensions. Grounded in the frameworks of actor-network theory, material semiotics, and affect theory, this synthesis demonstrates that alcohol in Taita-Taveta is more than a substance; it actively constructs cultural identities, mediates social bonds, and embeds itself in the region's socio-economic fabric. Its influence extends beyond individual choices to shape communal behaviours, revealing how alcohol acts to sustain and challenge Taita-Taveta's social order.

This perspective on alcohol as an active participant in Taita-Taveta's networks has significant implications for public health interventions and policy. Recognizing alcohol's entanglement within these social and economic networks suggests that effective public health strategies must engage with its cultural significance. Culturally attuned approaches that address both the health risks and the social and economic entrenchment of alcohol can help mitigate its harmful effects without destabilizing the structures that communities rely on.

This chapter has explored alcohol as an actant, demonstrating its agency in mediating rituals, interactions, and cultural expressions in Taita-Taveta. By shaping material and relational networks, alcohol emerges as a foundational force within and in the making of the community's social fabric. However, alcohol's agency is not limited to individual or ritual interactions—it materializes distinctly across the spatial contexts where it is consumed, produced, and regulated. To deepen this analysis, the next chapter examines the geographies of drinking, revealing how spatial-material configurations mediate alcohol's role as a social and cultural nexus.

CHAPTER FOUR

Geographies of “Problem Drinking”

In this chapter, I explore the geographies of drinking in Taita-Taveta through the lens of spatial, material, and digital dynamics. I highlight how specific drinking practices are shaped by urban and rural landscapes, the availability and improvisation of material resources, and the use of digital tools to coordinate or regulate these spaces. I conceptualize drinking spaces as active intersecting points where socio-economic, cultural, and technological factors intersect rather than simple backdrops for consumption. For instance, informal drinking spaces often double as marketplaces where local economies thrive. At the same time, formal establishments may serve as venues for digital payment systems and coordinated events that reinforce community ties. These scenes emphasize the agency of both human and non-human actors coming together and shaping these geographies. In the subsections, I will address the interplay of formal and informal drinking spaces, gendered dynamics, digital tools, and cultural narratives within broader socio-economic contexts. Building on the previous chapter’s exploration of alcohol as an actant—which emphasizes its role in mediating rituals, intergenerational relationships, and socio-cultural identities, in this chapter, I shift the analytical lens to spatiality and materiality. While in Chapter 3, I highlight alcohol’s agency in rituals and intergenerational relationships; in this chapter, I examine how that agency manifests within specific geographic and spatial configurations. Drinking spaces (both formal and informal) are dynamic arenas where alcohol mediates access, consumption, and socio-cultural practices. Formal drinking spaces like bars and licensed establishments often emphasize structured interactions, regulated pricing, and digital payment methods. In contrast, informal spaces, including street corners and improvised gathering spots,

foster more spontaneous social interactions, fluid pricing, and community-driven resource sharing. Alcohol in these contexts serves as a bridge, shaping how individuals navigate these differing environments. In analyzing these spaces, we reveal how spatial dynamics intersect with alcohol's agency to produce social meanings, economic realities, and cultural expressions.

The lady selling at the bar tells me that business is particularly slow today due to the rains. She explains that some paths are impassable because streams have overflowed, making movement from one location to another very challenging, which has led to fewer customers. One boda boda rider enters and purchases half a bottle of Triple Ace. He quickly completes the payment via his phone, takes a sip, and leaves as soon as the seller confirms the transaction. Two customers walk in together, deep in conversation. They greet everyone present and sit next to me on a bench by the window. One of them, let's call him "Client A," asks for Chrome, but the seller informs him that it is unavailable. He settles for a Balozi beer, while his companion orders a large cup of keg. Their lively conversation, filled with laughter, reveals that they are close friends. Client A requests music to be played and suggests a song that makes him feel particularly happy. The song, Enjoy by Tanzanian artists Diamond Platnumz and Jux, features an amapiano beat. They play the song directly from the phone of Client A's friend. [Thursday, November 16, 2023, Bar in Mwatate sub-county]

This vignette, drawn from a fieldnote by a research assistant while describing a rainy day in a local drinking establishment in a rural part of Taita-Taveta, demonstrates the complex spatial and social dynamics of drinking. This seemingly routine interaction reveals the rich interplay of human agency, materiality, and digital connectivity in shaping alcohol consumption. The scene illustrates how drinking spaces are not simply venues for alcohol consumption but also dynamic points where broader socio-economic, cultural, and technological entanglements intersect. The *boda boda* rider's swift transaction illustrates the fluidity of his livelihood and how alcohol consumption becomes embedded within it. Client A's request for music is tied to his desire for a celebratory mood, as depicted by his interaction with his companion, and shows how drinking spaces are produced to become sites of emotional, social, and cultural expressions. At the same

time, the seller's commentary about the rains points to how geographic conditions directly influence drinking patterns, shaping accessibility and patronage.

These dynamics reflect the central concerns of this chapter: how drinking spaces are created, maintained, and experienced; how material and digital infrastructures shape the geography of alcohol consumption; and how these processes contribute to broader patterns of problem drinking. These spaces are not just alcohol consumption settings but also active participants in shaping the behaviours, relationships, and cultural expressions of those who inhabit them. The vignette captures this relationality by showing how social practices, material improvisations, and technological interventions shape drinking spaces.

Geographic perspectives provide a critical lens for understanding these entanglements. Instead of viewing drinking through reductive moral or biomedical frameworks, geography emphasizes the spatial, cultural, and material conditions that shape alcohol consumption. As geographer James Kneale (2021) notes in his analysis of the evolution of drinking establishments over a century, drinking spaces are socially constructed and deeply tied to moral and political discourses. In Taita-Taveta, this means examining how weather patterns, socio-economic inequalities, and digital technologies intersect to produce the unique geographies of alcohol consumption. The vignette shows how heavy rains affect customer mobility, limiting access to drinking spaces, while mobile technologies facilitate seamless transactions and social interactions, revealing the evolving nature of these geographies.

Spatialization, which is about the active production, negotiation, and experience of space, is particularly central to these dynamics. Drinking spaces in Taita-Taveta actively reflect their users' socio-economic and cultural realities. Patrons like the *boda boda* rider navigate these spaces pragmatically, relying on their functionality and accessibility. These spaces also foster

social relationships and cultural expressions, as seen in Client A's request for music and his friend's role in facilitating it. Human geographer Samantha Wilkinson (2015), in *Alcohol, Young People and Urban Life*, draws on qualitative research with young people in Manchester, UK, to argue that drinking spaces are fluid and relational, co-produced through networks of people, objects, spatial contexts, and everyday practices. In Taita-Taveta, this relationality manifests in the improvisation of material elements, such as benches and makeshift shelters, and the integration of digital tools, such as mobile payment systems and music-sharing technologies.

The material infrastructures of drinking spaces further mediate how alcohol consumption is experienced. In the vignette, the bench by the window, the plastic cups for keg beer, and the phone used for mobile payment are not just objects but key components of the drinking experience. These materials reflect the economic and social realities of the patrons while structuring their interactions and as Kneale (2021) observes, the physical arrangements of drinking spaces often reveal broader social and economic dynamics. In Taita-Taveta, the adaptability of drinking spaces reflects the resilience of marginalized communities in navigating economic precarity and regulatory pressures. For instance, makeshift *Pasha* dens and other informal drinking joints illustrate how communities create and maintain spaces that meet their immediate needs while evading regulatory scrutiny.

Digital technologies add another layer of complexity to the geographies of drinking. The vignette shows how mobile phones facilitate payment and sociality, with music requests and digital interactions enriching the drinking experience. James Ash and colleagues (2018) describe these intersections as the “digital turn” in geography, where digital tools reshape spatial practices and interactions. Here, we see mobile technologies reconfigure how people access and engage with drinking spaces. *Boda boda* riders deliver alcohol on demand, mobile payment systems

streamline transactions, and digital communication networks allow patrons to navigate enforcement risks in real time. These digital geographies intersect with physical spaces to create new forms of connectivity and interaction.

In this chapter, I build on the relational insights of the previous chapter, “Alcohol as an Actant.” In that chapter, I explored how alcohol mediates social relationships and cultural practices in Taita-Taveta, highlighting its agency within human and material networks. ANT provided a framework for understanding how alcohol “does things,” influencing behaviours, shaping identities, and mediating relationships (Labanyi, 2010). While in the previous chapter, I focused on relationality, in this chapter, I focus the analysis on spatiality. I examine how alcohol’s agency is enacted within specific geographic and material contexts, such as those seen in the vignette, where rains, mobile technologies, and improvised infrastructures mediate the accessibility, consumption, and sociality of alcohol.

Focusing on the geographic, material, and digital dimensions of drinking practices, this chapter offers a situated analysis of problem drinking in Taita-Taveta. Here, I explore how drinking spaces are created, sustained, and experienced, emphasizing their dynamic and relational nature. Through this lens, I critically examine how drinking spaces contribute to the broader socio-cultural and economic landscapes of alcohol consumption, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding the geographies of drinking in Taita-Taveta.

Defining the Geographies of Drinking

Human geography offers critical insights into the relational and processual nature of spaces, revealing how they are socially produced and continuously reshaped through interactions. French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space provides a foundational perspective, arguing that spaces are not fixed, nor are they passive, but are actively

created in and through social practices, material arrangements, and symbolic meanings (Lefebvre, 1991). Applying this to drinking geographies, we see how spaces of alcohol consumption in Taita-Taveta are a result of ongoing negotiations between economic constraints, cultural traditions, and regulatory pressures. For example, informal drinking spaces such as *Pasha* and *Chang'aa* dens emerge as adaptive responses to socio-economic inequalities and legal restrictions, reflecting Lefebvre's idea of "lived space," where material and social realities converge (Lefebvre, 199: p. 38).

Geographer Mark Jayne and his colleagues (2008), in their review *Geographies of Alcohol, Drinking and Drunkenness*, expand on this by emphasizing the relational geographies of alcohol consumption, where broader cultural, political, and economic processes shape drinking spaces. Their work critiques static views of drinking spaces, arguing instead for an analysis that considers how spaces are co-constituted by social practices and material infrastructures. In Taita-Taveta, this relational perspective is evident in how drinking spaces adapt to local conditions. For example, women in Mwatate sell alcohol at Jombo Village in a major waterway valley under a tree, shielding production sites from law enforcers, while in Voi, women sell *Mbangara* by the riverside, where patrons drink while standing and quickly walk away. Additionally, the integration of mobile technologies for payment and social coordination further highlights the adaptability of these spaces.

Relational geographies also emphasize the interconnectedness of spaces, shedding light on how flows of people, objects, and practices continuously reconfigure their boundaries and meanings (Massey, 2005). This perspective is particularly relevant to Taita-Taveta, where the movement of alcohol shapes the spatial dynamics of drinking, the mobility of patrons (often facilitated by *boda boda* riders), the economic contexts, the degree of rurality or urbanity of

locations, and the influence of regulatory forces. The transient and improvisational nature of many drinking spaces, such as roadside Wine's and Spirit shops, under a tree or *Korongoni Pasha* points, reflects Massey's concept of "space as a product of interrelations," constantly evolving in response to shifting socio-economic and cultural conditions (Massey, 2005, p. 9).

Participatory material-semiotic geospatial mapping, as one of the approaches that I applied in this dissertation, provides a complementary framework for analyzing drinking geographies by examining how spaces are co-produced and distributed through material and symbolic practices. Law and Mol (2002) emphasize that materiality is central to the production of spaces, with objects and infrastructures actively shaping social practices. In Taita-Taveta, this is evident in the geospatial distribution and material configurations of drinking spaces, such as the variation in drinking spaces across locations, the use of disposable cups in some keg dens, and the reliance on mobile phones to facilitate transactions and social interactions. Participatory geospatial mapping workshops conducted during this research reveal how community members interpret and represent these material and spatial arrangements, stressing their significance in shaping local drinking geographies.

These theoretical frameworks also speak to critical perspectives in human geography that interrogate the socio-political dimensions of space. For example, geographer and social theorist David Harvey (2006), in *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, emphasizes that spatial arrangements play a central role in reproducing social and economic inequalities, arguing that space is always saturated with power relations. This is evident in Taita-Taveta, where the spatial distribution of drinking establishments reflects broader patterns of economic marginalization and regulatory control. Informal drinking spaces, for instance, often located in peripheral or hidden areas, serve

as sites of both resistance and vulnerability, illustrating the spatialized nature of power and inequality.

Drinking spaces are shaped not only by social and cultural practices but also by emotional attachments and symbolic meanings, reflecting their entanglement with both cultural and emotional geographies. Jayne and colleagues (2008), for instance, point out the embodied and emotional experiences of alcohol consumption, arguing that drinking spaces are not simply physical locations but also affective environments shaped by, and shaping, the emotions and behaviours of their users. In Taita-Taveta, this relational pattern is evident in the communal atmosphere of many drinking gatherings, which foster a sense of belonging and cultural identity. This contrasts with the clandestine and often isolating nature of consuming so-called illicit brews, such as *Chang'aa* and *Pasha*, particularly in areas under heavy surveillance.

Digital geographies further complicate the spatial dynamics of drinking, as technologies such as mobile phones and mobile payment systems reshape how people interact with and navigate drinking spaces. Reflecting on the work of scholar James Ash and colleagues (2018) in *Digital Geographies*, where they demonstrate how digital tools create new spatial practices by enabling forms of connectivity and interaction that transcend physical boundaries—I observed in Taita-Taveta how mobile technologies play a crucial role in reconfiguring the geographies of drinking. These technologies facilitate alcohol deliveries, coordinate social gatherings, and aid in evading law enforcement. Such digital geographies intersect with material and relational dynamics, illustrating the multi-layered nature of drinking spaces.

In the context of Taita-Taveta, these theoretical insights reveal how drinking spaces are simultaneously physical, social, and symbolic constructs. They are shaped by the entanglement of human and non-human actors, socio-economic conditions, and regulatory frameworks,

reflecting broader patterns of inequality, cultural negotiation, and resistance. These spaces, from makeshift *Pasha* dens to digitally mediated alcohol deliveries, are shaped by adaptation and improvisation, which reflects how drinking practices are produced through ongoing relationships and shifting conditions. Therefore, this section frames the geographies of drinking in ways that allow for an analysis of how drinking practices are situated within and shaped by the specific geographic, socio-economic, and cultural conditions of Taita-Taveta.

The Drinking Spaces

Drinking spaces in Taita-Taveta County are vibrant arenas where social, cultural, and economic forces intersect. They range from formal establishments to informal setups, reflecting the resilience and everyday struggles of the communities they serve. These spaces reflect and negotiate the tensions between rurality and urbanity while making visible the socio-economic challenges, cultural adaptations, and informal negotiations with regulations that shape drinking practices.

Formal drinking spaces such bars, restaurants, wines and spirits shops, hotels, nightclubs, and *Mnazi* pubs –demonstrate the structural incorporation of alcohol consumption into the regulated economy. These establishments operate under licensing frameworks prescribed by the *Taita-Taveta County Alcoholic Drinks Control and Licensing Act, 2016*, which specifies conditions such as operating hours, health and safety standards, and compliance with zoning laws (see Table 2). However, the distinction between these establishments is not always clear-cut; they often adapt informally. For example, wines and spirits shops, although licensed for off-premises sales only, often create temporary seating areas for on-site consumption, a practice that deviates from their licensing terms for off-premises consumption only. Similarly, restaurants

permitted to serve alcohol only with meals often cater to patrons seeking drinks alone, reflecting the tensions between formal regulations and local practices.

Table 5: Overview of Alcohol Licensing Provisions for Drinking Spaces

Liquor License Type	Premises	Operating Regulations	Related Licenses
Retail License	Bars, wines, and spirits shops	Off-premises sales only, prescribed hours	Business Permit
Hotel License	Hotels with lodging facilities	Unlimited sales to lodgers and guests	Restaurant License, Business Permit, Public Health Certification
Restaurant License	Restaurants	Sales with meals; prescribed hours	Hotel License, Business Permit, Public Health Certification
Club License (Members)	Membership-based clubs	Sales to members allowed at any time	Business Permit, Public Health Certification
Proprietary Club License	Nightclubs	Sales permitted 7 PM–3 AM	Business Permit, Public Health Certification
Theatre License	Theatres, cinema halls	Sales permitted during shows	Business Permit, Public Health Certification
Temporary/Occasional License	Event spaces, temporary venues	Sales for specific occasions only	N/A
<i>Mnazi</i> Retail License*	Semi-formal <i>Mnazi</i> premises	Variable regulations based on context	County Business Permit, Public Health & Safety Certification

The asterisk means Mnazi does not outrightly feature in the County's Alcoholic Act, but it is still legal and regulated.*

Prospective operators must apply through the County Alcoholic Drinks Control and Licensing Board and are expected to provide details of premises and compliance with health and safety standards. The licensing process itself, meant to include public participation, often bypasses community input. Ideally, community members should have opportunities to voice objections or support for new establishments after inspection reports are displayed publicly. However, as a Licensing Committee member from the region explained, this step is frequently

overlooked. Villagers remain largely unaware of their right to shape the drinking landscape, and decisions proceed without their involvement. A 40-year-old male liquor licensing committee member explained the community's role in regulating local alcohol establishments:

You find that in some areas the citizens themselves will tell you that in this area we want 2 bars or one bar, because there's a law, and it's just because our people here have not been educated on the same, but there's a law that after inspection you go and write a letter to the sub-chief or a community meeting is held. So in case of anything and there's a complain then people from that village will say we don't want this one we don't want this one, we want this, although our people don't know this well enough, yeah, they don't know that law, but we are trying our best to make them aware so that they help us reduce that ... after the inspection report is out, it's supposed to be displayed where the villagers will see it -in a central area, so that they get information of their area.

This regulatory gap leaves communities with limited agency, enabling external actors and economic forces to shape local drinking spaces without adequate local oversight. Within these spaces, proprietors navigate a web of financial pressures that expose the vulnerabilities of the formal drinking economy. Rising operational costs, including licensing fees, taxes, and additional regulatory expenses, force many to adopt informal survival strategies, such as clandestinely sourcing supplies outside legal channels or extending operating hours. Though essential for survival, these adaptations reveal the fragility of formal drinking spaces in contexts marked with uncertainty and constraint.

Overall, it is clear that drinking spaces in Taita-Taveta are not easily categorized strictly as formal and informal. Instead, they occupy a fluid spectrum where regulatory frameworks, economic realities, and cultural practices intersect. The coexistence of formal establishments, such as licensed bars, hotels, and wine and spirit shops, alongside informal setups like *Pasha* joints, *Chang'aa* dens, and *Mnazi* pubs, reflects the complex socio-economic and cultural landscape of the region.

While formal establishments often signal order and regulatory compliance, informal spaces reflect localized improvisation, economic necessity, and cultural responsiveness. For instance, licensed bars and restaurants operate under the county's Alcoholic Drinks Control and Licensing Act, which sets limits on hours and safety protocols. Yet even within these formal settings, deviations from regulations—such as wines and spirits shops permitting on-premises drinking or restaurants serving alcohol without meals—show how localized habits and everyday negotiations reshape these spaces.

Conversely, informal drinking spaces, often dismissed as unregulated or illicit, serve as vital hubs of cultural expression and economic sustenance. Venues like *Pasha* joints thrive in urban slums and rural homesteads, providing accessible alternatives for those excluded from the formal economy. *Chang'aa* dens, hidden in dense vegetation or private compounds, represent the precarious end of this spectrum, facing persistent crackdowns while continuing to cater to marginalized populations.

This overlap becomes especially visible in spaces like *Mnazi* pubs, which blend rural traditions with strategies for navigating regulation. Often operating in a semi-legal capacity, these venues move between formal and informal registers, reflecting their roots in the notions of local traditions while adjusting to contemporary economic demands. The use of repurposed containers for serving *Mnazi* and the communal atmosphere speaks to the resilience and adaptability of these everyday spaces.

Field observations in a small, modestly sized pub located in a vibrant neighborhood of similar establishments point to the everyday adjustments proprietors make. During a candid conversation, the owner shared that she sometimes opens as early as 11 a.m. to accommodate some specific customers. These individuals, she explained, come “*kufungua lock.*” Her matter-

of-fact tone suggested that dependency not only shapes individual routines but also informs how and when businesses operate. Still, she acknowledged that such early openings fall outside the legal operating hours of 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. To avoid detection, she keeps her doors tightly shut and curtains drawn. “*I do that because police lately wanasumbua,*” she said, referencing frequent police raids and the need to stay under the radar.

Financial challenges add another layer of complexity. The proprietor detailed the cumulative compliance costs for each year, which include a 7,000-shilling license (~ \$56 USD), a 4,000-shilling (~ \$32 USD) liquor board fee, a 5,000-shilling (~ \$40 USD) health department fee, and other ancillary expenses. In addition to these regulatory burdens, intense local competition further strains her business. She described how she had to reduce the price of Mnazi from 140 shillings (~ \$1.2 USD) per Dabali (a 750ml bottle) to 120 shillings (~ \$1.0 USD) to remain competitive, particularly against a rival vendor who sells at 100 shillings (~ \$0.8 USD). This competitor, who owns two pubs in the area and doubles as a supplier, sources alcohol directly from producers, avoiding intermediary costs and maintaining lower prices. These unequal dynamics leave small operators struggling to balance financial survival with compliance demands.

Such economic pressures are not isolated, but similar patterns emerge across other drinking spaces in Voi and Mwatate. Social hierarchies are often visible within these establishments: wealthier patrons tend to buy premium drinks, while those with fewer resources share lower-cost options, such as beer served in large jugs, as a way to manage expenses. Gender disparities are also significant; women who frequent drinking spaces often face judgment and stigmatization, reflecting societal biases that marginalize their participation in public leisure activities.

These examples illustrate the fragility of formalized drinking spaces. Although governed by regulatory frameworks, they are shaped by informal economies, economic inequality, and local cultural norms. Rather than functioning as strictly regulated environments, these venues operate through a mix of formal and informal practices—revealing the ongoing tensions between compliance, livelihood, and social expectations. At the same time, informal drinking spaces reflect community resourcefulness and constant negotiation with enforcement.

Informal drinking spaces, such as *Pasha* joints, *Chang'aa* dens, and *Mbangara* venues, provide an alternative for marginalized populations who cannot afford or access formal establishments. Operating on the fringes of legality, these spaces reflect both economic improvisation and cultural resilience in response to systemic challenges. For instance, *Pasha* joints represent a modern adaptation of traditional brewing practices, utilizing industrial yeast (*Pasha*) to accelerate fermentation. These joints are often discreetly situated in urban slums like Maweni in Voi or concealed within rural homesteads to avoid detection. Their minimalist setups—featuring makeshift benches and dim lighting—reflect their operators' limited resources and the need to remain discreet, especially given the frequent police raids. For many patrons, these venues are not simply a preference but a necessity shaped by the high cost and inaccessibility of formal alcohol outlets. What emerges is a clear expression of broader structural inequalities.

Chang'aa dens are even more precarious, as the production and sale of *Chang'aa* are heavily criminalized in Kenya. Often tucked away in dense vegetation, valleys, or private compounds, these sites are set up for quick abandonment during police raids. Their hidden, transient quality contrasts sharply with the semi-open, communal atmosphere of *Mnazi* pubs,

reflecting the heightened risks and vulnerability surrounding *Chang'aa* production and consumption.

Mbangara venues, deeply rooted in the notions of traditional practices, have adapted to shifting socio-economic realities. These spaces, particularly common in rural areas, function as spaces of both cultural expression and economic generation. However, like other informal drinking sites, they have to navigate ongoing threats of enforcement, balancing their role as community life with the risks of being shut down.

The Shift from Informal to Formal

Mnazi pubs, situated at the intersection of tradition and formality, offer a unique blend of rural conviviality and regulatory adaptation. Historically informal, these pubs have increasingly conformed to licensing frameworks, emerging as semi-legal spaces integral to both urban and rural communities. Their legal status relies loosely on the recognition of *Mnazi* as a traditional drink legalized in Coastal counties, though the Taita-Taveta County Alcoholic Drinks Control Act of 2016 provides only vague guidance under the clause on traditional beverages. This ambiguity allows *Mnazi* pubs to operate in a grey area, navigating between tradition and formal regulation. Structurally, these pubs are simple and utilitarian, often shaded by trees and equipped with recycled materials like the 250ml and 750ml commercial spirits bottles for serving *Mnazi*. They foster communal interaction, where patrons share stories, build connections, and transact business. Field notes from various *Mnazi* pubs capture this spirit of soiality while also highlighting the economic struggles faced by proprietors, who must navigate competition and affordability concerns. In one instance, a proprietor expressed frustration over a rival underpricing *Mnazi* below market rates, illustrating the delicate balance between community engagement and economic sustainability.

The Fluid Boundaries in the Urbanity and Rurality of the Geographies

Urban centers like Voi and Mwatate host dense networks of drinking spaces that blur the lines between formality and informality. Formal bars, *Mnazi* pubs, and informal joints coexist, catering to diverse and transient populations shaped by migration and urbanization. Urban *Mnazi* pubs, for instance, retain rural communal elements but adopt features like branded seating and structured layouts to attract a broader clientele. This blending of rural traditions with urban commercial strategies highlights the adaptability of drinking spaces to changing social and economic contexts. In rural areas such as Bura, however, drinking spaces emphasize traditional norms and community values. Despite their simplicity, they remain vital hubs of cultural exchange, even as proprietors struggle with economic challenges and fluctuating demand.

The distinctions between urban and rural drinking spaces are further blurred by the fluid practices of proprietors and patrons. *Mnazi* pubs in urban settings, for example, adopt strategies typical of informal dens, such as flexible pricing and extended hours, to remain competitive. Conversely, formal bars at times rely on informal supply chains or engage in non-compliant practices, demonstrating the interdependence of formal and informal economies. As noted by Awasom (2010), drinking spaces across African contexts often reflect broader socio-political structures, and this holds true in Taita-Taveta. The proliferation of informal dens mirrors systemic inequalities as populations with limited resources resort to cheaper, riskier drinking options. Meanwhile, the resilience of *Mnazi* pubs points to the enduring relevance of local traditions in the face of modernization.

Approaching drinking spaces in Taita-Taveta from this perspective shows that they are not just places where alcohol is consumed but sites where people navigate social constraints, assert identities, and push back against regulation. Shaped by their socio-economic and cultural

landscapes, these spaces resist simplistic classifications and point to the layered, often contradictory roles they play in the broader drinking geographies of the county.

Mapping and Understanding Drinking Spaces with Geospatial Semiotics

The geographies of drinking in Taita-Taveta illustrate a complex entanglement of alcohol with everyday life, shaped by historical processes, economic realities, and cultural practices. These drinking spaces function as more than sites of consumption; they serve as hubs of social interaction, economic survival, and, in some cases, disruption. To explore these dynamics, I employed a participatory geospatial material semiotics mapping (PGMSM) approach, which I designed to collaboratively visualize and analyze the spatial and socio-cultural dimensions of drinking spaces in Voi and Mwatate. This method became a powerful tool for grounding narratives about these spaces in the lived experiences of the people who interact with them daily.

The PGMSM approach, detailed in the methodology chapter, involved two workshops—one in Voi and the other in Mwatate. Each workshop engaged diverse community members, including alcohol users, informal brewers, formal sellers, and local leaders. Guided by the researcher and two research assistants (one in each sub-county), participants collaboratively sketched detailed maps of their neighborhoods, identifying drinking spaces alongside other landmarks such as schools, churches, and marketplaces.

These maps, rich in detail and symbolism, served as mediums for collective storytelling. They offered unique insights into how drinking spaces are produced, navigated, and contested. Combined with participants' reflections, the maps unpacked the historical, cultural, and economic forces shaping these geographies and exposed the tensions and conflicts inherent in these spaces.

Voi Drinking Spaces

The maps from Voi (see Figures 23 and 24) offer a community-driven perspective on the spatial distribution of drinking spaces and their interconnectedness with broader social and economic dynamics. The Nairobi-Mombasa Highway dominates both maps, acting as a central artery linking Voi's neighborhoods and facilitating access to drinking spaces. Other key geographic features include the Voi River and seasonal water pathways, locally known as *Makorongo*, which participants identified as influential elements in shaping the drinking landscape.

The maps illustrate the diverse alcohol economy in Voi, highlighting the coexistence of formal establishments like bars, *Mnazi* pubs, and wines and spirits shops with informal, often illicit venues such as, *Pasha* dens, *Chang'aa* dens, and *Mbangara* dens (*Mwasina* in Figure 24). The spatial distribution reveals distinct patterns: informal dens cluster densely in economically marginalized neighborhoods such as Maweni, Tanzania, and Mwakingali, areas characterized by high unemployment and limited regulatory enforcement. In Group 1 Map (Figure 20), informal dens marked with coloured stickers, with the number of outlets in a particular area inscribed on each sticker. *Chang'aa* dens are indicated by orange stickers, while *Mbangara* dens are marked with pink stickers. The concentration of these outlets, totaling 50 dens, is primarily located along the lower side of the road leading to town and just beyond the outskirts of Voi town. In Group 2 Map (Figure 21), the spatial pattern remains largely consistent with Group 1 whereby the informal drinking spaces cluster on the lower side of the town area, particularly in the area between the highway entrance to town and the Voi River. Here, *Pasha* joints are represented by green dots, *Chang'aa* dens by blue dots, and *Mbangara* (*Mwasina*) dens in purple dots. In contrast, *Mnazi* pubs are more widely dispersed, but still show notable concentrations in

areas such as Maweni, Birikani, Sofia, and Mazeras. These pubs are marked with green colouring in the Group 1 Map and yellow dots in the Group 2 Map. Other formal establishments, including wines and spirits shops, are primarily concentrated in Kaloleni, Kasarani, and Sofia, reflecting the commercialized alcohol economy characteristic of urban cores.



Figure 20: Voi Drinking Spaces Map (Group 1)

These maps not only visualize the physical layout of drinking spaces but also expose the socio-economic realities underpinning them. Participants frequently linked the proliferation of informal dens to unemployment, particularly among youth. In our discussion following the mapping process, one female participant said, *“Idleness is the cause of drinking the illicit brews... if they are given something to do, like when kazi mtaani came around, most youths were busy.”* The maps place residential areas alongside clusters of drinking spots, revealing how

economic struggles weave alcohol into everyday life as both a coping mechanism and a source of livelihood.

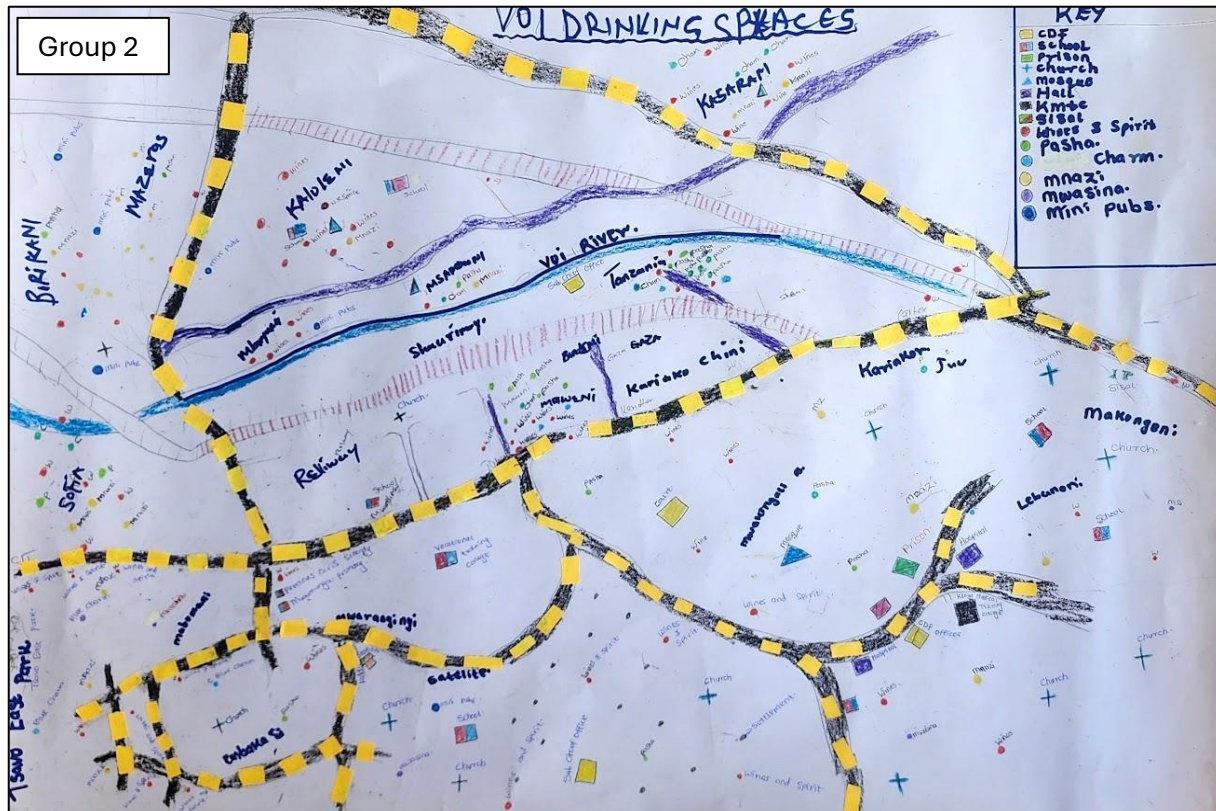


Figure 21: Voi Drinking Spaces Map (Group 2)

Economic pressures also sustain the informal alcohol trade. Landlords who rent spaces to alcohol sellers often prioritize financial gain over concerns about the type of business. As one participant put it, mimicking a landlord's attitude: *"I do not care where they get the money as long as they pay my rent."* This sentiment reflects the broader economic challenges that perpetuate the alcohol economy, even when its social consequences are widely acknowledged.

Participants also expressed concerns about the social impact of these spaces. They noted how drinking disrupts family dynamics, with intoxicated individuals often neglecting their responsibilities or creating conflict within households. Youth were singled out as particularly

vulnerable, with many turning to alcohol as a result of idleness and peer pressure. Meanwhile, women's participation in drinking spaces sparked debates about morality and respectability, reflecting the gendered expectations placed on public behaviour. During an in-depth interview in Voi, a 38-year-old man shared his perspective on how some women become entangled in alcohol use and the broader moral implications within the community. He described a trajectory shaped by vulnerability, social influence, and perceived moral decline:

She depends on well-wishers. Instead of being fed for free, she's given casual work such as washing clothes, babysitting for those running errands, etc. But then she meets worldly women who mislead her: "Why suffer? Go buy some trousers and a crop top; we'll show you how to survive." They introduce her to prostitution. By the second year, she starts drinking. One day, she comes home drunk, tries to cook, and falls asleep, leading to a gas explosion that kills her and her children. All this because of alcohol.

In this narrative, women's presence in drinking spaces is not portrayed as neutral but rather as symbolically charged, representing entry into socially disruptive and morally ambiguous spaces. This entanglement reflects local anxieties about respectability, womanhood, and familial responsibility, where women's participation in drinking is framed as a departure from moral norms and a pathway to social decline. Such narratives reveal deeper concerns about gendered vulnerability, economic precarity, and the perceived risks of straying from traditional expectations. Additionally, the proximity of drinking spaces to schools and churches created tensions, raising questions about the moral and behavioural conflicts inherent in these geographies. The moral discomfort expressed by participants was not solely about the act of drinking but about the symbolic disruption of normative social order, especially when drinking activities intersect with spaces associated with education and spirituality.

The differences between drinking spaces also elicited nuanced perspectives. Informal venues like *Pasha* and *Chang'aa* dens were seen as particularly problematic due to their lack of regulation and associated health and safety risks. Participants suggested restricting these

spaces to specific areas, emphasizing that *Pasha*, in its original form which is *Mwasina*, for example, was traditionally reserved for elders. Formal establishments like wines and spirits shops, while ostensibly regulated, were criticized for operating beyond legal hours and attracting a wide demographic, including youth. Some participants alleged that law enforcement officers owned certain shops, complicating efforts to enforce regulations and reduce problem drinking.

Mwatate Drinking Spaces

While Voi reflects a fragmented, urbanized drinking landscape, Mwatate presents a peri-urban reality where rural traditions and urban influences converge. This hybrid geography reveals how drinking spaces in Mwatate blend communal rural traditions with the commercialized and urbanized patterns increasingly evident in Taita-Taveta. The maps from Mwatate (Figures 22 and 23) illustrate the distribution and diversity of drinking spaces, situating them alongside landmarks such as the Taveta Highway, residential areas, schools, and the Mwatate Sisal Estate. Informal venues such as *Pasha* dens, and *Chang'aa* dens cluster in economically marginalized areas like Kariobangi, Kitivo, Majengo, and Soko ya Zamani, where accessibility and affordability drive their prominence.

[illegible]

The peri-urban character of Mwatate blurs the sharp distinctions seen in Voi's urban drinking geographies. Spaces historically positioned on the periphery are now located closer to the town center, driven by increasing commercial integration. *Mnazi* pubs, long associated with rural drinking traditions in coastal Kenya, have become commercially significant in Mwatate, serving as communal hubs where residents gather to share stories and foster relationships.

Economic vulnerability shapes Mwatate's drinking spaces as both sites of survival and sources of social tension. Many residents, particularly women brewers (*Mama Pima*), turn to brewing and selling alcohol to support their families. One participant explained:

We, as women, contribute to the drinking problem. The government should approach us because there are many educated and skilled women who could start businesses. But we stay in this because there's no alternative. Arrests don't help; we need better options—jobs or business support.

The youth were identified as the most vulnerable demographic, drawn to informal drinking spaces by unemployment and peer pressure. Participants described a growing dependency on alcohol, with practices like *kutoa lock* perpetuating cycles of consumption. The health consequences of poorly brewed alcohol were also emphasized, with participants recounting cases of liver damage and deaths caused by excessive additives. One participant lamented, “*We have buried people who drank alcohol with too many additives. Their cheeks and stomachs swelled, and they lost their appetite for food.*”



Figure 23: Mwatate Drinking Spaces Map (Group 1

Connecting Voi and Mwatate's Spatialities and Socio-Culturalities of Drinking

The geospatial-semiotic mapping of Voi and Mwatate reveals that drinking spaces are more than physical sites of consumption but also socially charged spaces shaped by overlapping economic, cultural, and social forces. Drawing on Lefebvre's notion of socially produced space (Lefebvre, 1991) and Massey's relational geographies (Massey, 2005), the mapping exercises illustrate how drinking spaces adapt to local realities while engaging with broader socio-economic processes.

In Voi, the fragmentation of drinking spaces into distinct clusters reflects the urbanized environment, where formal establishments serve wealthier patrons while informal dens cater to marginalized populations. In contrast, Mwatate's hybrid geography showcases the fluid coexistence of rural traditions and urban influences. This duality exemplifies how alcohol economies in Taita-Taveta adapt to the spatial, cultural, and economic contexts of their communities.

Gender dynamics further complicate these geographies. Women brewers in Mwatate challenge traditional gender roles, occupying spaces deemed socially inappropriate while sustaining local economies. Similarly, public drinking by women in Voi reflects shifting norms around gender and respectability, highlighting the contested moral geographies of drinking spaces.

Through these analyses, the geographies of drinking emerge as multifaceted and deeply contextual, illustrating how alcohol economies reflect the socio-spatial fabric of Taita-Taveta. These findings underscore the need for context-sensitive interventions that address the unique challenges of each locality, balancing economic realities with social and cultural considerations.

The Digital Technologies in Re-Shaping Geographies of Drinking

I owned my first mobile phone in September 2002 after I received my student loan for the first semester of my second year of undergraduate studies. It was a small Motorola GSM feature phone with basic functionalities such as calling, texting, and a then-popular snake game. By 2007, mobile phones had reached even rural areas, transforming everyday interactions. This personal memory reflects the broader adoption of digital technologies in Kenya, where tools like mobile phones and M-Pesa (a mobile money platform by Safaricom mobile network operator launched in Kenya in 2007 and provides money transfer and micro-financing services) now underpin significant aspects of daily life, including informal economies such as alcohol sales. Building on this context, therefore, I shift focus to Taita-Taveta, to analyze how these technologies reconfigure drinking spaces and practices in ways that challenge traditional norms.

These technologies change not only where and when people drink but also how they interact with alcohol and with each other. They mediate the spatialities, temporalities, and socio-economic realities of drinking, reshaping traditional practices and amplifying the complexities of problem drinking. In doing so, they reveal how local traditions intersect with modern innovations, creating dynamic spaces where cultural negotiation and economic precarity coexist.

In Taita-Taveta, mobile phones and M-Pesa have emerged as central tools in reshaping drinking spaces. No longer confined to fixed physical locations such as bars or formal drinking establishments, alcohol consumption now extends to private homes, *boda boda* shelters (strategic spots where riders converge to wait for passengers), and roadside spots, all coordinated through mobile phones. Patrons use their phones to place orders and coordinate deliveries, transforming otherwise mundane spaces into temporary drinking zones. Sellers have embraced this flexibility, adapting their practices to cater to the mobile and decentralized nature of alcohol transactions.

This shift became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when traditional drinking spaces were closed, forcing sellers and patrons to find innovative ways to maintain their interactions.

M-Pesa, Kenya's widespread mobile money platform, plays a pivotal role in these evolving geographies. Its integration into even the most remote areas reflects its accessibility and adaptability, with even feature phones -also known locally as *Kabambe* -enabling financial participation across socio-economic divides. Sellers prominently display their M-Pesa details on laminated sheets or handwritten signs, emphasizing its centrality to the drinking economy. Patrons use M-Pesa not only to pay for drinks but also to borrow money or settle debts, embedding economic transactions within broader social relationships.

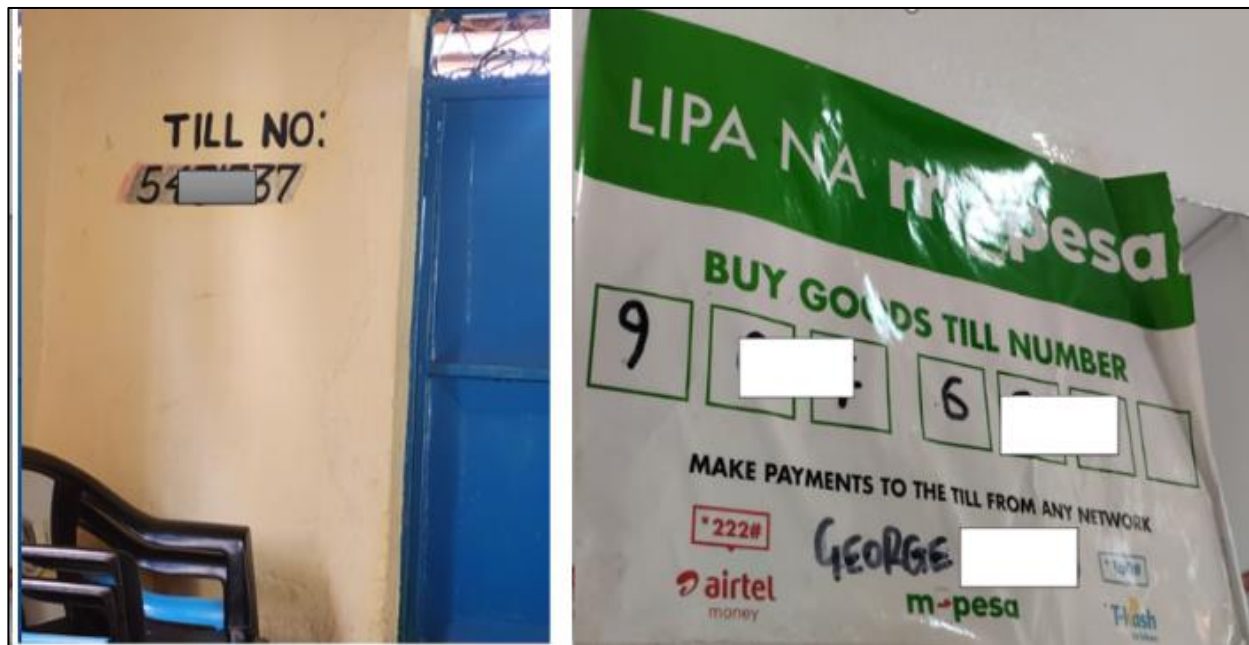


Figure 24: Payment Details at Alcohol Joints. **Left:** Handwritten payment details on a plain surface. **Right:** Printed details on Safaricom glossy paper. Both highlight the use of mobile payment systems in alcohol spaces. Photos by author, August 2023

One scene from a Wines and Spirits shop in Voi illustrates this dynamic:

At 11:15 am, a man enters the shop, visibly unsteady and shaking. He orders a quarter of ‘people vodka,’ a local favourite here, and quickly downs the shot with water that was in a jug on the counter. He then hands his Kabambe phone to the seller, asking her to charge it so he can make payment via M-Pesa. This appears to be a routine, as the seller quietly complies without comment. The man retreats to a corner to sit alone, quietly with a somber demeanor. After 30 minutes, he returns to retrieve his phone, pays his bill, and leaves, requesting the seller to continue charging the phone until he returns later.
[Tuesday, December 05, 2023, A Wines and Spirits Shop]

Scenes like these demonstrate the central role of mobile phones and digital payments in everyday drinking practices. While convenient, these tools also reflect broader socio-economic struggles, as patrons frequently rely on M-Pesa to borrow money or settle debts. These economic transactions are embedded within social relationships, revealing the dual role of digital tools as facilitators of convenience and markers of precarity.

The flexibility afforded by mobile technologies also extends drinking’s temporal boundaries, disrupting traditional constraints. Previously, drinking hours were limited by the availability of cash or the operating hours of physical spaces. Now, mobile-enabled alcohol deliveries allow patrons to drink at any hour, often sustaining late-night consumption. Sellers, too, benefit from this temporal fluidity, coordinating deliveries with *boda boda* riders and mitigating risks associated with carrying cash by relying on digital payments. This extension of drinking hours recalls Sociologist Manuel Castells’ concept of “timeless time,” in his work *The Rise of the Network Society* where he describes how digital tools dissolve temporal constraints, enabling activities to occur continuously (Castells, 2011: p. 460). Timeless time signifies the cancellation or blurring of temporal sequences, where traditional linear progression is replaced by a state of perpetual simultaneity. Social practices within this framework aim to negate sequence, adapting to a reality characterized by perennial simultaneity and simultaneous

ubiquity. In the context of drinking spaces, this phenomenon is evident in how mobile payments and real-time digital communication facilitate uninterrupted alcohol transactions and consumption, transcending traditional boundaries of time and location. However, while empowering, this disruption exacerbates problem drinking by facilitating impulsive and prolonged consumption. Sellers report how M-Pesa transactions sustain late-night drinking, with some patrons ordering repeatedly through the night, extending sessions that might have otherwise been curtailed.

Beyond facilitating consumption, mobile technologies have emerged as tools of resistance within the contested terrain of informal drinking spaces. These tools enable patrons and sellers to coordinate real-time warnings during police raids, ensuring the swift dismantling of drinking dens and avoiding arrests. One seller illustrated this practice, sharing how she coordinated alerts with her patrons through mobile calls, advising them to avoid showing up at her *Chang'aa* joint during high-risk times. Field observations, as captured by a research assistant, effectively illustrate this dynamic interplay between state enforcement and resistance:

Upon arrival, I noticed an unusual silence around Lady N's Chang'aa joint. The usual activity was absent, and the house was locked. I call Lady N. She answers promptly, explaining that the police are conducting a patrol and actively arresting people. Business in the village has ground to a halt as sellers close shops to avoid being caught. She assures me she'll return in an hour. I take a seat on a vacant bench, observing the subdued environment as I wait. Despite anticipating others to stop by and inquire about Lady N, no one appears. Two hours pass before Lady N arrives, dressed casually in tight jeans, a t-shirt, and rubber shoes. Greeting me with a smile, she quickly laments about the challenges of the day. A new Officer in Charge of Station (OCS) and Officer Commanding Police Division (OCPD) are in town, and she hasn't had the opportunity to connect with them. She explains the importance of "sitting with them," a euphemism for establishing relationships through payments to ensure smooth business operations without interference. Curious, I ask if she alerts her customers on such high-risk days. She nods, affirming that she makes calls to warn them to stay away. Suddenly, someone knocks on the window. Lady N peers outside, recognizes the visitor, and unlocks the door. A man wearing worn shorts, a t-shirt, and gumboots enters. After brief pleasantries, he requests a half bottle of cham. Lady N fetches a half-filled chrome bottle from another

room and hands it to him with a smile. As he sips, Lady N chats with him about his farm. Their conversation shifts to the police patrol. He inquires if the situation has calmed down. Lady N responds cautiously, “I think so, but it’s too risky to take chances.” The man chuckles, raising his bottle, and jokes, “So today is take-away day?” Lady N laughs, confirming the day’s adjusted operations, where drinks are sold discreetly rather than consumed on-site. [Monday, November 27, 2023, in the afternoon at a Chang’aa joint]

These practices reflect James Scott’s (2020: p. 34) concept of “illegibility.” Scott explains how states strive to make societies more “legible”—standardized, simplified, and therefore more controllable—by imposing rigid structures that often fail to align with the complex realities of local communities. In contrast, “illegibility” emerges as informal actors use everyday tools and strategies to subvert state surveillance, preserving local practices and autonomy. This adaptability is evident in the informal economy, which thrives on its capacity to resist and adjust, as seen in Lady N’s coordination efforts and the discreet transactions during a crackdown. The law enforcement, however, is well aware of the complexity of these interactions. One officer explained how sellers anticipate raids by leveraging the very networks they rely on to operate informally:

When we plan these operations, the police vehicles are marked and have the service colors. Before we even reach a village, everyone already knows the police are coming, because boda boda riders spread the word: ‘We have met with the police car.’ If you are selling alcohol, you will know they might come to you. To counter this, we have started conducting operations early in the morning, between 4:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m., or late in the evening. We also use motorbikes to catch these people off guard.

Mobile phones and *boda boda* riders have become pivotal in creating this informal intelligence network. Sellers and consumers use these tools to resist and redefine how informal drinking spaces function in response to the constant threat of state regulation. The widespread use of mobile payments further complicates enforcement by rendering transactions invisible to traditional oversight mechanisms. Consequently, these operations have become increasingly covert and adaptive, reflecting the resilience of the informal economy, which is rampant in

Kenya as exemplified by the Jua Kali sector²², which, according to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, accounts for up to 80% of the overall employment in Kenya (KNBS, 2023).

Cultural Narratives and Digital Media in Drinking Spaces

The role of digital technologies in shaping drinking geographies extends to cultural dimensions, particularly through digital media. Songs, memes, and viral challenges disseminated on platforms such as TikTok and WhatsApp normalize drinking behaviours, embedding alcohol consumption within broader narratives of identity, celebration, and resilience.

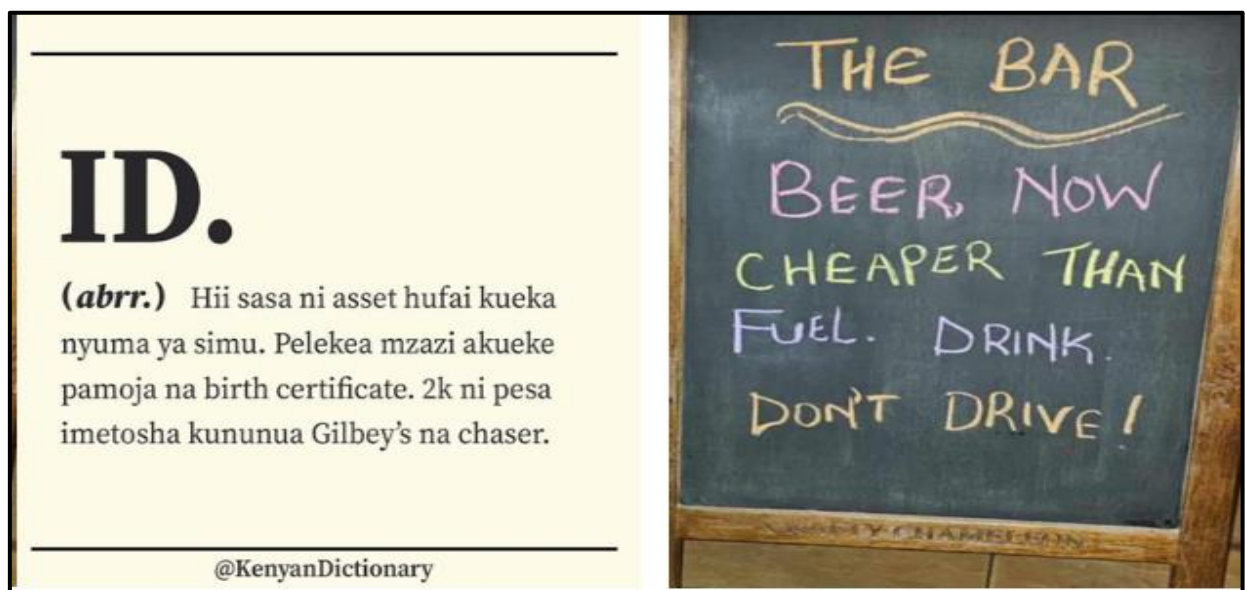


Figure 25: Humorous Memes Reflecting Alcohol-Related Realities. *Left: A meme comparing the raised fee for replacing a Kenyan ID to the price of alcohol. Right: A meme urging patrons to drink, not drive, as beer is cheaper than fuel during high fuel prices. Photos circulating on social media, November 2023.*

²² Jua Kali, which in Kiswahili means “hot sun,” is used to refer to the informal sector in Kenya. This sector entails all economic activities not formally recognized yet actively operating and contributing to the country's economy.

Then, music—a constant feature of drinking spaces—serves as both entertainment and a cultural script, reinforcing communal behaviours while downplaying the risks of overindulgence.

A fieldnote from a *Mnazi* pub in Voi captures this dynamic:

It's about 18:42 hrs. Soft music plays in the background as patrons chat excitedly. One of them connects his smartphone to the pub's Bluetooth speakers and plays 'Pombe' by Iyanii. The lyrics glorify heavy drinking, asserting that 'there's no alcohol in heaven' and encouraging listeners to drink without restraint. The mood shifts visibly as patrons smile, laugh, and sing along, embodying the celebratory ethos of the song. The pub owner, recognizing the patrons' joy, raises the volume, further amplifying the shared moment of cultural affirmation. [Thursday, October 26, 2023, Mnazi Pub]

The power of digital media in producing cultural narratives becomes evident in the widespread popularity of songs like *Enjoy* by Diamond Platnumz, *Pombe* by Iyanii, and *Furaha* by Iyanii. These songs, often played repeatedly in drinking spaces, not only create affective environments that normalize and celebrate alcohol consumption but also extend their reach through digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. A sample lyric and the themes and digital implications of these songs are summarized in below:

Part of Pombe song lyrics:

Pombe by Iyanii

...

*Pombe leta pombe
Pombe leta pombe
Siwezi bila pombe
Leta pombe leta pombe
Pombe*

*Raha najipa mwenyewe, leta pombe tulewe
Kila mtu apewe, tulewe tulewe
Sina doo lakini lazima pombe
Sherehe aibambi bila pombe
Hapa kwa bash tumelewa pombe
Pombe pombe pombe
Pombe pombe pombe
Shida nikilewa pombe, nakua muhongo sana
Shida nikilewa pombe, naongea kizungu sana
Shida nikilewa pombe, dem za watu ni warembo sana*

*Pombe leta pombe
Pombe leta pombe
Siwezi bila pombe Leta pombe leta pombe Pombe*

Translation

(More general translation)

*Bring alcohol
I cannot manage without alcohol
So, bring alcohol
I am simply entertaining myself, so bring alcohol, and we get drunk
Everyone should be served, and we all get drunk
I do not have money, but I must drink because a celebration is not fun without alcohol.
In this bash, we are drunk with alcohol, just alcohol
But the problem is that when I am drunk, I tell too many lies
The problem is that when I am drunk, I speak too much English
The problem is that when I am drunk, other people's girlfriends become very beautiful
Bring alcohol because I cannot manage without alcohol.*

Table 6: A Condensed Thematic Summary of the Three Popular Songs

Theme	Song Title	Key Messages	Digital Media Implications
Alcohol as a marker of Joy	Enjoy by Diamond Platnumz & Jux	Drinking as an expression of joy and self-care.	Lyrics are widely shared on social media, reinforcing a casual drinking culture through viral trends.
Normalization of Alcohol	Pombe by Iyanii	Drinking is central to social gatherings; heavy drinking is justified as part of life's pleasures.	Memes and videos featuring excessive drinking glamorize consumption, targeting younger audiences.
Social Bonding and Drinking	Furaha by Iyanii	Drinking fosters happiness and social connections.	TikTok, Instagram videos and Facebook reels highlight drinking as a social norm, further embedding it in communal practices.

Through these digital platforms, these cultural narratives reach broader audiences, embedding themselves deeply into everyday drinking practices. While they foster a sense of

community and cultural identity, they also obscure the risks of excessive drinking, particularly among youth, who are often the target of such trends. This amplification of drinking culture, devoid of critical perspectives on its consequences, reflects the double-edged role of music and digital media in shaping behaviours.

The integration of digital tools into Taita-Taveta's drinking spaces, therefore, reflects a broader negotiation between modernity and tradition. Digital technologies such as M-Pesa and mobile phones are symbols of modernity, enabling new forms of sociality and economic interaction (Castells, 2011). Yet, their integration into informal economies underscores the fragility of these spaces, where resilience coexists with vulnerability. For low-income patrons, the reliance on M-Pesa for credit or debt settlement often exacerbates financial instability (Donovan & Park, 2022; Macharia et al., 2023). Sellers, while leveraging digital tools to evade regulation, remain at constant risk of state intervention, highlighting the precarious balance that defines these geographies.

Digital technologies are reshaping how drinking unfolds in Taita-Taveta, altering when, where, and how alcohol is accessed and experienced. From coordinating deliveries to circulating local drinking narratives online, these tools extend drinking spaces and introduce new ways of navigating social and regulatory constraints. At the same time, they expose the vulnerabilities of already marginalized groups, particularly in contexts of surveillance, economic precarity, and uneven connectivity. These dynamics call for an approach to drinking geographies that attends to the entanglements of digital, material, and social life in shaping problem drinking.

Drinking Geographies and Governmentality in Taita-Taveta

The drinking geographies of Taita-Taveta reveal a complex interplay between informal practices and a layered regulatory framework. Informal brews such as *Pasha*, *Mbangara*, and

Chang'aa dominate rural and peri-urban spaces, thriving in makeshift, transient venues—under trees, in abandoned structures, or in homes that can be quickly vacated at the sight of law enforcement. In contrast, formal drinking establishments, concentrated in urban centers like Voi and Mwatate (the primary study sites), reflect the state's vision of controlled alcohol consumption within licensed and regulated spaces. These twin geographies of drinking—informal and formal—operate within a complex web of social practices, economic realities, and regulatory strategies, exposing the ongoing dynamics of governance and resistance.

In the informal sector, brews like *Chang'aa*, *Pasha* and *Mbangara* are deeply woven into the fabric of daily life. Their affordability and accessibility make them indispensable for economically marginalized populations. For many, these brews are not merely a means of relaxation but also crucial social resources, reinforcing bonds and sustaining cultural traditions. However, these same brews exist in constant tension with the state, which frames them as threats to public health, morality, and economic order, categorizing them as illicit. In an in-depth interview one morning with one of the assistant chiefs from the study sites, he explained the state's perspective on informal alcohol regulation:

In alcoholism [sic], there are laws, registration laws for people who sell, that is alcohol licensing. There are alcoholic drinks termed as illegal because they have not been certified as safe for human use. Secondly, those selling have not been tested [public health screening], because that is like food—they prepare it and they sell it, not like other alcohol that is produced in a brewery then sold here. Those working in breweries, there is a big chance they were tested [screened] by the doctor and certified fit to handle human food. The ones we mostly watch don't have set aside time; anytime, even 5am or 4am, they can sell. So as the assistant chief, I am involved in trying to reduce alcohol consumption, whether illegal alcohol or how legal alcohol can be sold within agreed time.

This perspective reflects the dual focus of the state's governance strategies: ensuring that formal alcohol meets safety and licensing standards while suppressing the informal sector's perceived threats to social order. Informal brews, often sold at all hours in unregulated spaces,

are framed as undermining productivity and morality. Yet, these regulatory efforts frequently clash with the region's economic realities, where unemployment and precarity drive individuals to rely on cheaper, more accessible options like *Chang'aa* and *Pasha*.

The geography of informal drinking is shaped further by Taita-Taveta's physical landscape. In the lower zones of Voi and Mwatate, where rainwater from the hills carves massive gullies known as Makorongo, the transient nature of informal alcohol spaces mirrors the impermanence of these physical features. Brewers and sellers adapt by establishing temporary locations that can be quickly abandoned during raids, often using these natural features for concealment. Patrons, too, navigate these spaces vigilantly, relying on local networks to track law enforcement. As one brewer in Mwatate noted: "When the police come, we just move. They destroy the pots, but we can always get more. It's not easy to leave this business when there is nothing else to do." This adaptation reflects the economic precarity that compels individuals to persist in brewing despite repeated setbacks.

In contrast, formal drinking spaces reflect a different configuration of alcohol consumption. Licensed bars and restaurants are meant to operate under a regulatory framework managed by county liquor boards, police, and other state agencies. These establishments are expected to follow zoning laws, observe noise restrictions, and respect set operating hours, presenting themselves as models of order and compliance. Their brightly lit interiors and branded signage, often featuring names and logos like Tusker and Senator Keg, symbolize their place within the formal economy and the state's taxation system. Yet, for many poorer residents, these spaces remain out of reach, reinforcing the socioeconomic divide that characterizes Taita-Taveta's drinking geographies.

The regulatory framework governing alcohol consumption in Taita-Taveta is complex and multi-layered, involving numerous institutions and actors. At the county level, legislative assemblies formulate alcohol policies mirroring the national *Alcoholic Drinks Control Act* (commonly known as the Mututho Law). County liquor boards oversee licensing and monitor compliance, while law enforcement agencies conduct raids and enforce penalties. Chiefs and assistant chiefs, acting as intermediaries between the state and local communities, play a crucial role in addressing informal alcohol production and consumption. These efforts are supported by grassroots structures such as *Nyumba Kumi* and community policing initiatives, which facilitate localized surveillance and enforcement. The layered nature of this governance system reflects broader themes of governmentality. Sociologist Mitchell Dean (2009) in *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* argues that governance operates not only through direct control, but also by shaping norms, values, and individual behaviours (Dean, 2009; Foucault, 1991). Similarly, anthropologist Tania Li, in her work in Indonesia where she applies governmentality within the context of development initiatives—illustrates how techniques of ‘improvement’ tend to shape communities (Li, 2007). In Taita-Taveta, public health campaigns and moral narratives about alcohol reinforce this approach. Posters and murals in schools and technical institutions warn against the dangers of alcoholism, juxtaposing images of drunkenness and despair with those of sobriety and productivity. These visual messages serve as a daily reminder of societal expectations, particularly for the youth, who are often framed as both victims of and solutions to the problem of alcoholism.



Figure 26: A mural at Mwanjila Polytechnic in Bura with the slogan “Stimu ni Sumu” (Drunkness is Poisonous) urges youth to safeguard their health, money, and time. The artwork highlights the dangers of excessive drinking, reflecting broader public health efforts in Taita Taveta County to promote responsibility and awareness among young people. Photo by author, August 2023.

Despite the state’s efforts, the resilience of informal drinking networks reveals the limitations of this regulatory framework. While law enforcement agencies focus on punitive measures, such as the destruction of brewing equipment, they fail to address the structural factors driving the popularity of informal brews. Economic precarity, limited employment opportunities, and the high cost of formal alcohol create a persistent demand for affordable alternatives like *Pasha* and *Chang’aa*.²³

The geography of drinking in Taita-Taveta is thus a contested field where state power meets local ingenuity. Formal establishments embody the state’s vision of order, compliance,

²³ This speaks to Jayne and colleagues' observation that alcohol governance must contend with the broader social and economic conditions that shape drinking practices.

and economic integration, while informal brews challenge these ideals, thriving on the margins of regulation. Together, these geographies reveal the complexities of governmentality in managing a practice so deeply embedded in social and cultural life. By examining these dynamics, it becomes clear that the governance of alcohol in Taita-Taveta is not just about regulation but also about navigating the tensions between survival, resistance, and state control.

Conclusion

Rethinking Drinking Geographies

The drinking geographies of Taita-Taveta reveal an intricate web of socio-economic resilience, cultural adaptation, and regulatory tension. Drinking spaces are far more than sites of alcohol consumption; they reflect broader inequalities, cultural dynamics, and human adaptability. This chapter underscores the intersections of spatial, material, and digital dimensions in drinking practices, offering critical insights for those concerned with the social and health implications of alcohol consumption.

The informal and formal alcohol economies in Taita-Taveta exemplify the fluid boundaries between legality and survival. Informal brews like *Chang'aa* and *Pasha* illuminate how economically marginalized populations create ways to navigate exclusion from regulated systems. These brews function as both cultural reference points and economic strategies, reflecting what Scott (1985, p. 29) describes as “weapons of the weak,” the subtle, everyday acts through which marginalized groups resist domination. This concept finds resonance in how informal brewers and patrons of unlicensed drinking spaces adapt to state control through various strategies. These include situating brewing dens in hidden or transient locations, leveraging digital tools for covert communication during law enforcement raids, and cultivating

local networks of trust that warn of police crackdowns. Such acts demonstrate the agency of individuals in resisting structural oppression while ensuring their economic survival.

The “weapons of the weak” framework also highlights how marginalized groups repurpose existing systems to their advantage. Mobile technologies like M-Pesa, initially designed for formal economic inclusion, are adapted for informal alcohol economies, allowing brewers and sellers to conduct cashless transactions that evade detection. Similarly, social networks, including *boda boda* riders and patrons, function as informal intelligence networks that disrupt the “legibility” of state surveillance (Scott, 2020). These tactics illuminate how informal actors negotiate and reshape the boundaries of state power, asserting autonomy within an inherently unequal system.

However, these acts of resistance are not merely reactive; they also reflect cultural and social agency. For example, the resurgence of brews like *Mbangara* and *Pasha* demonstrates how traditional practices evolve to meet modern economic and regulatory challenges. By incorporating industrial yeast or adopting faster brewing techniques, these informal producers embody cultural resilience while addressing the immediate needs of their communities. This underscores the adaptability of cultural practices in the face of systemic marginalization, transforming traditional brewing into a form of socio-economic resistance.

Conversely, formal drinking spaces, while exemplifying regulatory compliance and integration into the formal economy, perpetuate socio-economic divides by catering predominantly to wealthier demographics, leaving many reliant on informal alternatives (Holloway et al., 2008; Nicholls, 2013). These divides further underline the broader dynamics of spatial inequality that shape the region’s drinking geographies.

Regulatory frameworks, on the other hand, though aimed at controlling alcohol-related harms, often fail to address the structural drivers of problem drinking, such as unemployment, poverty, and systemic inequality. Current approaches which focus on criminalization and enforcement, often exacerbate marginalization, overlooking the need for inclusive, community-led solutions.

Digital technologies further complicate this landscape, reshaping the geographies of drinking in ways that extend beyond physical spaces. Mobile phones and M-Pesa transactions enable the decentralization of drinking spaces, facilitating not only convenience but also resistance to law enforcement (Ash et al., 2018). These technologies highlight the dynamic interplay between modernity and tradition, creating opportunities for innovation while deepening socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Addressing these issues requires more nuanced approaches. Strategies that incorporate harm reduction principles, as outlined by sociologist Tim Rhodes²⁴ in *The 'risk environment'*, could shift the focus from punitive measures to mitigating risks in drinking practices (Rhodes, 2002). Culturally tailored interventions that acknowledge the economic and social significance of informal alcohol economies can create pathways for sustainable change. From an anthropological perspective, this analysis reinforces the importance of relational frameworks in understanding health behaviours. Drinking practices in Taita-Taveta are deeply embedded in cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts, reflecting Lefebvre's (1991) notion of socially produced space. By centering the voices and lived experiences of those navigating these spaces, research and practice can uncover the complex interplay between agency and structure in shaping alcohol consumption.

²⁴ Tim Rhodes in his framework the 'risk environment' champions for harm reduction strategies that consider both individual actions and the broader social and structural contexts that contribute to risk.

For those working in health and policy, the geographies of drinking in Taita-Taveta challenge us to move beyond simplistic, top-down solutions. Public health campaigns must prioritize community engagement, tailoring interventions to the unique socio-spatial realities of different drinking spaces. Supporting alternative livelihoods for brewers and sellers, integrating digital tools for harm reduction, and fostering participatory approaches can bridge the gap between regulation and resilience.

Ultimately, the drinking geographies of Taita-Taveta compel us to rethink alcohol not only as a public health concern but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon. These spaces, shaped by historical legacies and contemporary challenges, are arenas of adaptation and resistance. Interventions that recognize and work within these complexities are more likely to achieve meaningful and equitable outcomes.

This chapter has analyzed drinking spaces as dynamic sites where spatial, material, and digital infrastructures mediate alcohol consumption. These geographies reflect alcohol's agency as a social and cultural nexus, shaping access, interactions, and broader community dynamics. Yet, within these spaces, alcohol also forges and complicates social ties, dependency, and kinship relations. The next chapter builds on this analysis to explore alcohol's relational dimensions, examining how it mediates kinship structures, trust, and economic dependencies within Taita-Taveta's social fabric.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Alcohol Married My Mother”: Brewed Socialites and the Mediations of Kinship,

Dependency, and Social Relations

Introduction

“We are at this chirpy local pub, buzzing with energy. People surround the pool table, yelling and cheering at every shot. Two guys sit on a nearby bench made of wood, side by side. One of them is wearing a red Manchester United T-shirt with black trousers and is clearly a few drinks down, slurring his words, swaying slightly, but his eyes are glued on the pool game. The other one, seeing an opportunity to talk, leans over casually and says, ‘Nizimue?’, which loosely means asking for a sip of his drink. The man in the red shirt beamed at him, as if they had been friends since time began, and after one long gulp, he handed over the cup. He pulls out a cigarette next and offers it in turn. They sat there sharing the smoke, taking turns as if some unsaid agreement was binding them. At one moment, the guy in the red shirt leans back and says, ‘This is how we are supposed to live.’ I don’t know what it is about the moment—little, honest, and entirely in sync with the vibe—but it’s just right. The mood breaks as the scorekeeper calls the first guy over to take his spot at the blackboard. He downs the rest, hands back the cigarette, grinning, ‘Don’t finish it completely!’ and walks away towards marking the scores. The scoring proceeds with him sitting engrossed, pen in hand, making sure all the figures are correct. Across the room, the pub owner is enjoying his own drink, lazily observing the scene unravel. He calls out to the guy keeping score, who looks unusually sober tonight: ‘What’s up? Why aren’t you drinking as usual?’ The guy quickly gives a sly smile, responding, ‘In this government of Ruto, you should know why already.’ The owner bursts out laughing and retorts, ‘You are here too early—you must be flush with cash tonight!’ Still chuckling, he offers him a drink, saying he’ll just dock it from the guy’s pay the next morning. The man, without hesitation, agrees to the offer, and the owner nods to the waiter, who approaches him, still smiling, with a full cup. The guy reaches for the drink and even turns to his buddy in the red T-shirt to ask him if he wants to share. The man waves him off, grinning, and says, ‘Nah, you drink for me. I’m good.’ Balancing his drink and the scores, the man keeps at it, earning his 20 shillings per game. At the time he had marked eight games, the alcohol appeared to kick in. His voice gets louder; his once-perfect handwriting starts to wobble into messy scrawls. He realizes he’s losing the plot, calls over another guy who’d been waiting for an inning to keep score, hands him the marker, and heads back to the bench, clearly relieved to tap out before he messes up someone’s game. The pub stays lively; it’s still a very lively, energetic space. There’s just some jovial mood across the room – that kind of night that one can easily describe as timeless, filled with chaos, connection, and shared moments that may serve to remind everyone why they keep coming back.” [Saturday, January 13, 2024, Day 2 follow-up observation with Mwakidu]

The connectedness between patrons and between patrons and sellers unfolds in a bar, a dynamic space where alcohol mediates everyday sociality. In Taita-Taveta, such spaces are more than recreational—they are hubs of interaction where kinship, dependency, and obligation are enacted and negotiated. Alcohol emerges as a material and symbolic mediator, weaving through the community's social fabric to forge connections, establish hierarchies, and animate economic exchange. Yet, these same interactions reveal alcohol's dual role as a source of both unity and conflict, inclusion and exclusion.

In this chapter, therefore, I build on the spatial analysis of drinking spaces explored in Chapter 4 to examine alcohol's role in mediating kinship, dependency, and social ties. While previous chapters demonstrated how alcohol functions as an actant and manifests agency across spatial contexts, this chapter focuses on alcohol's relational dimensions. Through concepts such as "*liquid kinship*," the analysis reveals how alcohol creates, sustains, and sometimes disrupts care, trust, and economic exchange relationships. By tying relational dynamics back to alcohol's material and spatial agency, this chapter further positions alcohol as a nexus of community life in Taita-Taveta.

I explore alcohol as a social actant—a dynamic participant in social life—by drawing on the Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) and anthropological frameworks of materiality (Carsten, 2004; Dietler, 2020). These perspectives situate alcohol as more than consumable, emphasizing its agency in shaping human relationships and cultural norms. Through a blend of ethnographic vignettes and critical analysis, I examine how alcohol is a mediator in kinship and dependency, a central element in rituals and ceremonies, and a facilitator of fluid yet precarious social networks, or what I term "*liquid kinship*." The presence or absence of alcohol, as well as

its sharing or withholding, reveals how kinship, dependency, and relational obligations are constructed, maintained, and, on some occasions, fractured.

In Taita-Taveta, alcohol consumption is deeply embedded within the social fabric, acting as a mediator of kinship, dependency, and broader social relations. Anthropological research has long recognized the symbolic and material importance of alcohol in social life, where its use transcends mere consumption to serve as a medium for forging, negotiating, and, at times, destabilizing relationships (Dietler, 2006; Heath, 2000). Alcohol functions as “embodied material culture,” often central to rituals, celebrations, and everyday practices, making it a powerful lens through which to understand the construction of social and cultural norms (Dietler, 2020).

Contemporary anthropological discourse on kinship has shifted from rigid, biologically based definitions to more dynamic understandings of relatedness. This shift is reflected in the work of Carsten, who argues that kinship is actively constructed through social practices, including material exchanges such as food, gifts, and alcohol (Carsten, 2004). In this context, alcohol emerges as an actant (as per Latour’s framework) that not only reflects but also shapes social networks, hierarchies, and obligations (Latour, 2005). Its role in creating temporary alliances or long-term bonds highlights its capacity to mediate complex social relationships within and beyond the immediate family unit. Furthermore, we see Gross’ work, which examined the cultural significance of mezcal in Oaxaca, Mexico, highlights how alcohol is imbued with social and symbolic meanings that reflect broader cultural identities (Gross, 2014). This study illustrates how alcohol can serve as a medium for expressing and negotiating kinship ties and social relationships within specific cultural contexts.

Here, we can, therefore, say the exchange and sharing of alcohol often underpin moral economies within communities, functioning as a “gift” in the Maussian sense, where the act of giving establishes reciprocal obligations (Mauss, 1967). This framework helps illuminate alcohol’s role in fostering both social cohesion and tensions. Recent studies emphasize that alcohol consumption and distribution practices are sites where power, trust, and social capital are negotiated (Nicholls, 2013; Yamaguchi et al., 2021). For instance, research by anthropologist Paul Hooper and colleagues on the Tsimane people of Bolivia highlights how manioc beer facilitates social reciprocity and cohesion, showing parallels to the role of alcohol in Taita-Taveta (Hooper et al., 2013).

Gender and power emerge as critical themes in this analysis. Women, who dominate the brewing and selling of alcohol, straddle the line between economic agency and societal stigmatization. Their participation in the alcohol trade is a source of financial independence but also exposes them to criminalization and social judgment (Shortt et al., 2017). Men, on the other hand, often assert their masculinity in public drinking spaces, yet their excessive consumption frequently disrupts familial structures, leaving women to bear the burden of caregiving. These dynamics reveal how alcohol both challenges and reinforces traditional gender roles, echoing Wilkinson’s (2015) observations on the intersection of alcohol, gender, and social expectations.

Moreover, alcohol consumption and its associated practices are deeply tied to notions of inclusion and exclusion. Participation in drinking circles is often a marker of belonging, reinforcing social ties and shared identities (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). However, the same substance also perpetuates stigmatization, particularly for individuals labelled as “problem drinkers,” whose behaviours challenge communal expectations and disrupt kinship bonds (Room, 2005).

By viewing alcohol as an actant within Taita-Taveta's social networks, this chapter, building on earlier discussions of alcohol as an actant and the geographies of drinking, explores its role as a mediator of kinship, trust, dependency, obligations, and community dynamics. By situating alcohol as an active participant in social networks, this chapter examines its dual role in fostering communal bonds while perpetuating dependencies and exclusions. The analysis is framed within broader discussions on materiality, moral economies, and the fluid nature of kinship, contributing to a deeper understanding of alcohol's capacity to shape social life across diverse contexts.

Alcohol and the relational life of rituals and ceremonies

Alcohol's cultural significance transcends its everyday use, playing a pivotal role in life-cycle rituals and ceremonies of the community in Taita-Taveta. Its use transcends simple consumption, becoming a medium for fostering communal bonds, reaffirming social hierarchies, and transmitting values across generations. Traditional brews like *Mnazi* (palm wine) and *Mbangara* are not merely drinks but cultural artifacts that facilitate the negotiation of relationships and reinforce collective identity. In events such as marriages, funerals, and birth celebrations, alcohol becomes an indispensable part of the proceedings, acting as a symbol of unity and mutual obligation. During a marriage *negotiation* process²⁵, for instance, offering alcohol is not just a gesture of goodwill but a culturally mandated practice that signals and creates respect and acceptance between families. As one of the community leaders from Bura described the ritualistic offering of alcohol to ancestral spirits, saying:

Others [young people] say, "Alcohol married my mother," reflecting beliefs tied to cultural practices. Because, in our traditions, if you take bride price to a particular

²⁵Among the Taita people, marriage culturally involves a negotiation process known in the Taita language as *Wupe*. This process entails discussions and decision-making regarding dowry payments between the groom's family and the bride's family, particularly involving the bride's father and her maternal uncles.

home, alcohol must be present. Elders will take a sip of alcohol and spit it on the ground, saying they are offering it to their ancestors to bless the ceremony.

This practice captures the cosmological dimensions of alcohol, linking the living with ancestral spirits and embedding the act of drinking within a broader system of ritual obligations. The symbolic act of spitting alcohol to the ground reflects a deeply rooted belief in the mediation of blessings through material offerings. Anthropologist Maurice Godelier, in his work among the Baruya people, has demonstrated that in gift exchange, certain sacred materials and objects carry with them the essence of social and spiritual relationships that go beyond economic transactions (Godelier, 1999). In this context, alcohol functions as such an object, where the giving and sharing of it reinforce bonds between families but also strengthen connections with the spiritual realm.

Similarly, alcohol holds a central place in initiation ceremonies that mark the transition into adulthood. One of the local administrators in Mwatate recalls a tradition in which young men were formally introduced to alcohol as part of their initiation. He describes how fathers would drink from a straw called *mkamba* in Taita language and then pass it to their sons, symbolizing the transfer of status, responsibility, and identity. “*From that day,*” the administrator notes, “*you would be allowed [to drink alcohol].*” The shared act of drinking signifies more than a rite of passage; it also expresses the communal ethos that underpins Taita kinship structures. However, this tradition stands in stark contrast to contemporary drinking practices, which are often disconnected from such cultural, communal frameworks to a redefined sense of community, which we can argue that the absence of these structured transitions may contribute to the unchecked patterns of alcohol consumption that some community members associate with social and moral decline. This deeply ingrained role of alcohol in rituals reflects broader anthropological insights into material culture. Scholars such as Dietler (2010) and Carsten (2004)

argue that material exchanges—whether food, gifts, or alcohol—serve to construct and solidify kinship bonds. Within the Taita community, the sharing of alcohol during ceremonies acts as, and makes its ritualized communication of belonging, trust, and shared responsibility. The phrase “*Alcohol Married My Mother*,” often invoked by youth to defend problematic drinking, portrays its cultural resonance. It symbolizes how alcohol has historically mediated relationships, shaping family narratives and community ties. Such practices parallel Gross’s (2014) observations on mezcal in Oaxaca, Mexico, where alcohol is imbued with symbolic meanings that express broader cultural identities. In Taita-Taveta, these rituals highlight alcohol’s capacity to sustain cultural continuity even as it adapts to changing contexts.

However, the commercialization of traditional brews has introduced a layer of complexity to these practices. As Wilkinson (2015) notes, in urban settings of Wythenshawe and Chorlton in Manchester UK, the commodification of alcohol often redefines its symbolic and cultural meanings. In Taita-Taveta, this tension is evident in debates over the authenticity of using store-bought alcohol for rituals compared to locally brewed varieties. According to my interlocutors, elders often view the latter as more culturally appropriate, lamenting the erosion of traditional values in favour of convenience and modernity, an indication that the relationship between alcohol and rituals is not without tension. Moreover, as younger generations reinterpret these practices, influenced by urbanization and economic pressures, traditional uses of alcohol are sometimes sidelined. Store-bought drinks, quick-fix brews, and delegitimization of cultural brews have increasingly replaced brews like Mwasina, prompting concerns among elders about the loss of cultural authenticity. This generational shift underscores the duality of alcohol’s role: it is both a preserver of tradition and a marker of modernity and changing social dynamics. As Shortt et al. (2017) observe in central Scotland among individuals recovering from alcohol

dependence, these tensions often tend to reflect broader societal transformations in values, practices, and intergenerational relationships.

Despite these challenges, alcohol's centrality in rituals and ceremonies remains a testament to its enduring cultural power. Whether cementing family ties during marriage negotiations or celebrating initiation to adulthood, alcohol functions as a vital mediator of social relationships in Taita-Taveta. Its dual role as both a unifying force and a site of cultural tension reveals the depth of its integration into the community's social fabric. By illuminating its complex and often contradictory functions, we gain a deeper understanding of how alcohol sustains not only rituals but also the collective identity of the Taita people. Moreover, this intricate involvement of alcohol in social practices paves the way for examining the emergence of "*liquid kinship*," a concept that captures the fluid and adaptive social bonds formed through shared consumption.

"Liquid Kinship": The Promise and Precarity of Alcohol-Mediated Social Bonds

Alcohol serves as a dynamic and multifaceted social intermediary in Taita-Taveta, mediating relationships that reshape traditional kinship structures, patterns of trust, and survival strategies within an economically precarious context. This exploration unveils the emergence of "*liquid kinship*"—a fluid, adaptive form of relatedness that binds individuals through shared consumption practices. At its core, "*liquid kinship*" both fortifies and tests community bonds, offering a compelling window into how marginalized communities navigate scarcity and social cohesion.

The flow of "*liquid kinship*" materializes most visibly within peer drinking circles and the intricate interplay between sellers and consumers. In these drinking circles, alcohol catalyzes the formation of informal support networks akin to the intensive resource-sharing relationships

described by sociologist Matthew Desmond in his work on urban poverty where he describes how individuals struggling financially often form “disposable ties” in order for them to have access to essential resources and support (Desmond, 2017). Besides, these circles operate through elaborate systems of reciprocity, reflecting anthropologist David Graeber’s insights into debt, where he points out that actions such as gift exchanges and rotating obligations are vital mechanisms for social continuity (Graeber, 2014). In Taita-Taveta’s drinking context, rotating drink purchases, informal credit systems, and shared obligations become the currency of connection.

Mwambisi, one of the young people I followed up with in this dissertation research, captures this dynamic succinctly. He says, *“I have many friends whom we hustle together in the neighborhood and villages... We are all drunkards. I met most of them at the drinking den, and some joined us later after seeing us drink alcohol in our village.”* This narrative illustrates how alcohol is a foundational element in establishing kinship-like bonds. By bringing individuals together in shared consumption, alcohol facilitates the formation of trust-based networks that mirror traditional kinship structures. Mwambeo, a 26-year-old man who is also among my primary research participants echoed the sentiment of reciprocity:

I have several friends, including work friends and those I grew up with. At the end of the day, the friends I spend time with are usually on the same page as me. Even if I don’t have money, they’ll still call me and buy drinks. I can say most of the friends I meet up with in the evening enjoy drinking alcohol. So, when it comes to money, these friends of mine are not selfish. If I’m short on cash, they’ll cover me, and when I’m in a better financial position, I do the same for them. We have fun together regardless of who has money at the time.

Such exchanges foster a sense of mutual dependency that anchors these relationships, offering material relief and emotional solidarity in a challenging environment (Graeber, 2014). However, it is essential to recognize that these supportive networks can also perpetuate dependency and

limit individual autonomy. Critics might argue that “*liquid kinship*” reinforces unhealthy reliance on alcohol, potentially exacerbating social and economic vulnerabilities. This perspective further illustrates the ebb and flow nature of “*liquid kinship*,” where the benefits of solidarity coexist with the risks of entrenching dependency.

The seller-consumer relationship introduces an even more intricate dimension to this “*liquid kinship*,” embodying what Janet Carsten describes as “*processual kinship*”. According to Carsten, among the Malays of Pulau Langkawi, their kinship system is not only defined by biological or genealogical ties but also is actively produced and continuously enacted and reproduced through other kin-like connections emerging from repeated interactions and shared experiences (Carsten, 2004). Far from being mere economic agents, sellers often assume roles akin to confidants, counsellors, and even surrogate family members. In an interview with a 54-year-old woman selling *Mbangara* in Mwatate, she explained: “Sometimes, *I know my customers better than their families do. I see them every day, I know their struggles, and I understand their habits.*” This transformation of market relationships into intimate bonds also speaks to *liquid kinship* where we see a fluid shapeshift from commerce into a form of care, creating what could be described as an “urban family” in spaces defined by vulnerability and shared reliance. Nevertheless, these alcohol-mediated relationships are fraught with precarity. The informal credit systems that sustain these networks epitomize the delicate balance between trust and risk. Sellers often extend credit based on perceived need, as one explains:

If a customer does not have money and I see they truly need alcohol, I give it to them. They will bring the money the next day or at another time. Some people... they can't function without it. I must give it to them so they can go to work, and they will pay me later.

While these arrangements reinforce bonds of trust, they also expose both parties to potential exploitation and economic strain. As Room (2005) observes, such obligation cycles

simultaneously bind individuals closer while amplifying dependency risks. The mutual dependencies created here reflect a moral economy where care and economic transactions intertwine, reinforcing the social fabric even as they embed vulnerabilities.

The emotional labour invested in maintaining these relationships adds another layer of complexity. Sellers, in particular, shoulder the psychological burden of their patrons' struggles, often serving as de facto counsellors. A 30-year-old female selling *Mnazi* reflects during our conversation:

When people are facing a problem that's really weighing on them, they often seek an opportunity to share it. Some will open up so much that you find yourself saying, 'Let me sleep on it, and by tomorrow, I'll have a solution for you.' You don't know what to tell them in the moment. Sometimes, their struggles affect you because you end up carrying their burden, wanting to find a solution for them. It's overwhelming for them, and by sharing with you, they're just looking for some relief.

This invisible emotional toll underscores the hidden costs of “*liquid kinship*,” where care work becomes both a bridge and a burden. Sellers are expected to not only provide the material goods their patrons desire but also offer emotional support and a sympathetic ear. While this care work is essential to maintaining these relationships, it can be mentally and psychologically taxing for the sellers, highlighting the interplay between kinship and dependency.

For consumers, especially those grappling with isolation or economic hardship, these networks provide vital support but can also perpetuate cycles of dependency. Labour exchanges for alcohol, for instance, reveal the complex entanglement of economic necessity and social inclusion. Mwambisi, a primary participant, describes these arrangements to a research assistant in one of their conversations:

Sometimes we go to the alcohol seller and do small chores for her, like if she needs water, we bring the water or firewood we fetch the firewood, and she gives us alcohol in exchange.

While these exchanges offer immediate relief, they also reflect broader patterns of structural violence (Farmer, 2004), where systemic inequalities constrain choices and entrench vulnerability. The exchange of labour for alcohol exemplifies how dependency is both a survival strategy and a reinforcement of existing power dynamics, tying into the theoretical frameworks of moral economies and kinship.

The fragility of these networks becomes starkly apparent in moments of exclusion or ostracism. Those who fail to uphold their obligations or conform to group norms risk being marginalized, both within drinking circles and their broader communities. A common sentiment emerges in observations such as: *“A drunkard is looked down upon because they drink carelessly and do not add value to the community. Even at home, they are excluded from family matters.”* This dynamic highlights the fluid nature of alcohol-mediated relationships: while they can foster inclusion and support, they also reinforce patterns of marginalization for those deemed unworthy or irresponsible. This reflects the tension in moral economies where inclusion is contingent upon adherence to certain social norms and responsibilities.

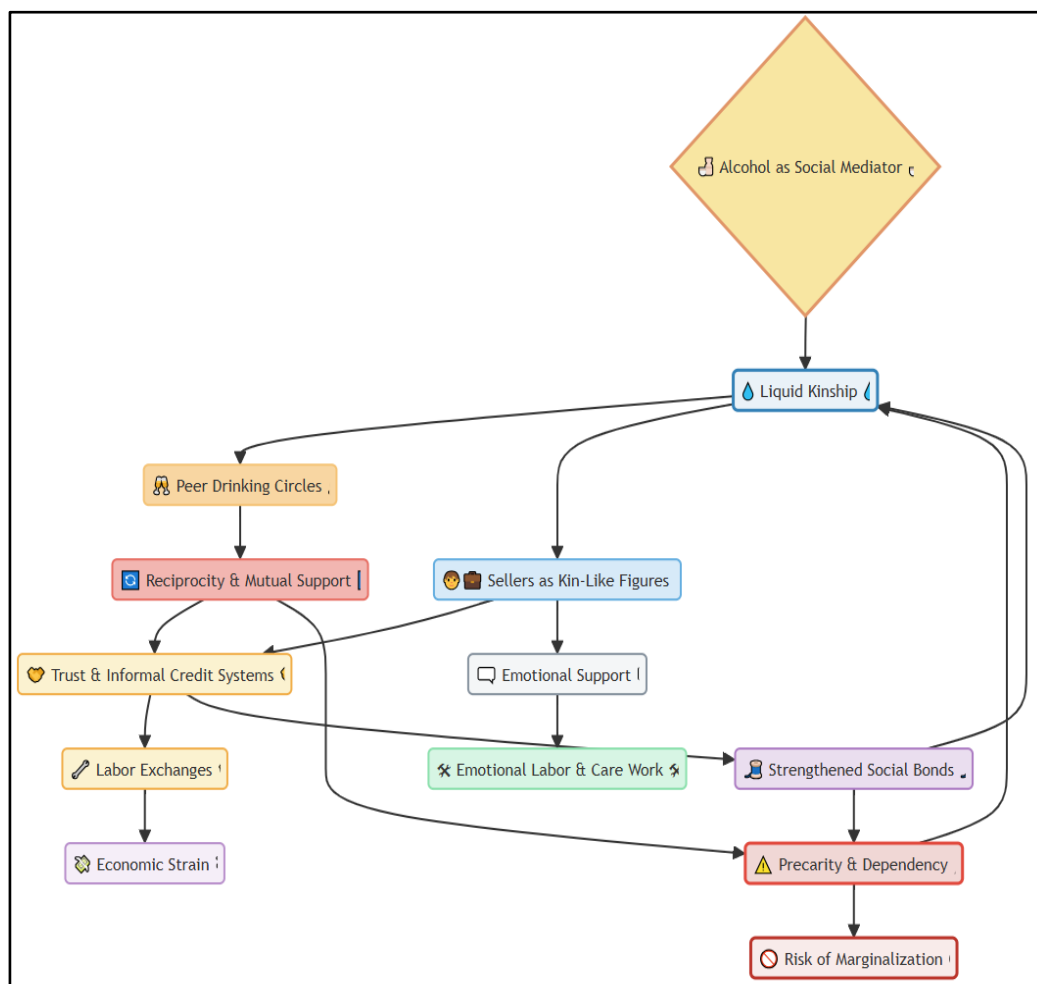
Through these intricate dynamics, alcohol in Taita-Taveta emerges as an active mediator in social relationships, akin to what Latour (2005) describes as a non-human actant that shapes and reshapes the social fabric. Its presence in these networks reveals the duality of its role: as a lifeline for connection and a potential source of strain. The reliance on informal trust networks underscores the resilience of these communities. Yet, their vulnerability to breakdown reflects the broader tensions of surviving in contexts where formal support systems are absent or inadequate. Figure 1 below illustrates the components and interactions within *“liquid kinship”* in Taita-Taveta. Peer drinking circles and seller-consumer relationships form the foundation of informal support networks and reciprocal obligations, leading to mutual dependency and

emotional solidarity. These dynamics can be unpacked by theoretical frameworks such as Graeber's debt mechanism and Mauss's gift economies, which sustain social bonds while simultaneously introducing economic strain (Graeber, 2014; Mauss, 1967).

The concept of "*liquid kinship*" thus provides a nuanced lens for understanding how marginalized communities construct alternative social networks through shared consumption practices. It challenges reductive narratives of alcohol as either a societal glue or a source of disintegration, instead revealing its multifaceted role as both a stabilizer and disruptor. In these precarious economic contexts, "*liquid kinship*" becomes a testament to human resilience, creativity, and the enduring need for connection, even as it underscores the fragility of these bonds in the face of structural inequalities.

Moreover, "*liquid kinship*" requires an expanded analysis to examine how women and men navigate these shared networks in Taita-Taveta. Its influence not only fosters connections or reconfigures households but also directly challenges culturally embedded ideals of authority, labour, and identity. By highlighting how fragile economic conditions have pressed women into new roles as brewers and traders, "*liquid kinship*" reveals a subtle reordering of power within families and communities. This shift compels a closer examination of gendered labour and the social obligations that emerge from alcohol-mediated relationships, setting the stage for the ensuing discussion on how these dynamics reshape familial and gender norms amid economic uncertainties.

Figure 27: A Flowchart of “*Liquid Kinship*” Dynamics



Gendered Dynamics and Socialities of Alcohol

Alcohol continues to shape familial and gendered dynamics in Taita-Taveta. Its longstanding position as both a facilitator and a disruptor of kinship becomes particularly evident when we examine how men and women navigate the social and economic pressures associated with alcohol production and consumption. Historically, the trade and consumption of alcohol were primarily the realm of men, reinforcing patriarchal norms through publicly visible drinking spaces that granted men avenues for social status, kinship ties, and loyalty. This trend builds on

Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" (1984: p.170), wherein social rituals, such as communal drinking, reproduce existing power dynamics and social hierarchies.

Recent economic pressures have forced a reconfiguration of these patterns. Women now act as brewers, traders, and increasingly, as consumers, challenging conventional labour divisions and longstanding gendered dependencies. Their emerging visibility in this sector highlights how economic precarity can fracture patriarchal boundaries, even as it exposes them to fresh forms of vulnerability and stigmatizing perceptions.

Mwakuida, a young person in Voi, explains how alcohol consumption disrupts household responsibilities:

You will always be late going home; a lot of time will be spent with friends and alcohol. There are responsibilities that, as a parent, you are supposed to fulfill. While your wife is cooking, you should be with your children, helping them with their homework and checking how they are doing at school. But you won't have time to attend to those responsibilities if you are drinking.

In his account, the moral economies of parenthood, care, and time are set against the backdrop of communal drinking. His words illustrate how male-centred networks built around alcohol can erode familial bonds and place the burden of everyday household responsibilities firmly on women. By foregrounding Mwakuida's perspective, we see how men's construction of kinship networks in bars or communal drinking areas intersect directly with household obligations, thus shaping dependency patterns and moral expectations.

Women's increased participation in alcohol production²⁶ further reflects a significant shift in local notions of kinship. One community leader notes that "it is mostly women" who are brewing and selling these days—a shift that connects them to broader consumer and supplier

²⁶ Women's primary role in producing and selling illicit brews in Kenya is rooted in cultural and economic factors. Traditionally, women have been the custodians of brewing practices, with the role passed down through generations. Economically, limited opportunities and restrictive licensing requirements often push women into informal brewing to support their families (Willis, 2002).

networks. On the one hand, these new roles offer economic survival strategies; on the other hand, they re-inscribe the precariousness of women's positions in these evolving moral economies.

A woman *Mbangara* brewer in Mwatate describes the exploitative dimensions of these changing networks:

Some people don't go to drinking joints with money; they go to 'kuzenga,' which means waiting on others to share with them. When they get drunk, they simply go home to sleep. Kuzenga is like kudoea—you don't have money, but if you find me there, I might give you some, or you might borrow from me and get a sip. That's the essence of kuzenga. It's a common habit, especially at places like the Pasha joint, where you'll find many young people just hanging around. You'll often hear them saying, 'Give me ten shillings or five so I can add to get some.' By the end of the day, they're drunk, even though they haven't worked.

Her account brings to life the tensions embedded in these new ties. Brewing and selling alcohol can be a strategy for mitigating economic hardship. However, it also reveals how dependencies form around a culture of reciprocity, borrowing, and indebtedness—sometimes exploiting women's labour and social capital. Although sharing practices can strengthen social networks, they often exploit the labour and resources of female brewers who occupy an already vulnerable position. These practices highlight the conflictual moral economies at play: the same networks that provide economic safety nets can become structures of exploitation and dependency.

Such shifts challenge entrenched notions of gender and kinship. A police officer affirms that “women drink—truth be told, even women drink. Unlike in the old days... now alcohol is consumed by both men and women.” While women's growing presence in public drinking spaces disrupts patriarchal norms, it also invites moral scrutiny. Another participant criticizes female drinkers: “The ladies who are drunkards... give birth to kids carelessly, yet they cannot cater to daily needs.” These sentiments reveal how communities use moral judgments to police behaviours that deviate from traditional family expectations.

Alcohol in Taita-Taveta thus destabilizes familiar structures and simultaneously opens alternate pathways to kinship. Women's entry into brewing and trading offers economic agency but also reflects systemic inequities and sparks social censure. The "*liquid kinship*" concept becomes a revealing framework: it shows how relationships forged through shared alcohol consumption can cultivate solidarity, reinforce dependencies, and ignite moral debate. These human voices illuminate the connections among kinship, moral economies, and evolving gender roles—forces that continue to reshape how Taita-Taveta residents experience and negotiate the deeply gendered world of alcohol.

However, the same networks that foster unity often draw new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. In the next section, we examine how drinking spaces serve as sites of belonging and mutual support while also imposing rules of reciprocity and economic contribution that can isolate those who cannot participate. This perspective expands our understanding of the social and moral landscapes emerging in Taita-Taveta, where alcohol's power to bring people together coexists with the pressures that push some community members to the margins.

Alcohol and the Complexities of Social Inclusion and Exclusion

Alcohol consumption in Taita-Taveta facilitates the formation of social bonds and solidarities, helping community members navigate everyday hardships and build collective resilience. Drinking spaces function as small-scale spheres of social inclusion where individuals find acceptance and shared support. Yet these same spaces also impose exclusionary practices, guided by reciprocity and economic contribution rules, that may marginalize those who cannot participate.

Drinking joints epitomize these *brewed solidarities*, where alcohol becomes a channel for collective identity and emotional connection. Mwambisi, a youth in Mwatate, describes a sense of belonging that unfolds through daily interactions:

When I have no money, and as I told you not every day do I have money, because I am a hustler (casual worker) so I don't get money on a daily basis. So on the days I have no money, I usually go to the drinking joints where we usually drink with my friends and they buy me alcohol even a little. Because it can't be that all of us don't have money and that's why I drink every day.

His words show how mutual dependence fosters an ethos of sharing and collective support. In line with scholars such as Wilkinson (2015) and Room (2001), these practices form “symbolic communities,” where alcohol becomes a shared resource that cements trust and social cohesion. Alcohol also lowers social barriers. In an in-depth interview with one of the women sellers in Voi, she notes, “*Once he takes one or two drinks, he stops feeling shy and is able to tell you all his problems.*” Through the lens of kinship and moral economies, these spaces nurture a sense of emotional safety: people articulate hardships, unburden themselves, and rely on one another for solace.

However, such inclusion is conditional. As one seller observes, “*A drunkard is looked down upon because they drink carelessly and do not add value to the community.*” In other words, membership in these networks depends on a person’s ability to reciprocate in some way—socially, financially, or both. Failure to meet these unspoken obligations leads to exclusion and isolation.

Tensions around *brewed dependencies* also surface in the economic ties between sellers and consumers. Sellers decide who can drink on credit, a practice that shapes social trust and loyalty. A woman *Mbangara* seller during a conversation with one of the research assistants explains:

Take, for example, this one who has already drunk and left. I understand him—he will come back later to pay. He has this habit, but I know him well, so I let it pass. Now, if a stranger tried to do the same, I wouldn't entertain it. I wouldn't serve him again; in fact, I'd send him away, even from a distance, telling him there's nothing for him here. But this one is different. He's not just a regular customer; he's also my mason—the one building my house. So, I give him some leeway.

Her account reveals how moral economies work in everyday life: credit and trust emerge as entwined elements of social relationships. Yet these arrangements remain fragile, hinging on shared dependence within a precarious economy. Gendered exclusions further complicate the picture. While men gain social capital from public drinking spaces, women face stricter judgments for the same behaviour. Paradoxically, women's roles as brewers and traders place them at the heart of these social worlds, even as they encounter heightened stigmatization. This duality shows the push-and-pull of inclusion and marginalization within alcohol-mediated social structures.

As these networks of inclusion and exclusion expand and contract, they highlight alcohol's power to unify and divide community members. Yet alcohol's capacity to create informal solidarities also informs how people organize themselves beyond the immediate setting of drinking spaces. The next section turns to *alcohol-mediated associations*, revealing how communities harness these shared practices to negotiate with broader social, economic, and political systems.

Alcohol-Mediated Associations and the Negotiation of Systems

Alcohol-mediated associations in Taita-Taveta capture the adaptability of informal networks under systemic pressures. These groups, formed around shared challenges and everyday rituals, demonstrate how marginalized communities leverage *brewed socialities* for survival, legitimacy, and collective action. A *Mnazi* seller describes the formation of a local

sellers' group: "*We highlighted our problems and figured out how to champion them... Being in a group means we are more likely to be heard.*" His reflection underscores how alcohol can unify scattered individual struggles into coordinated demands.

American sociologist Mark Granovetter's "weak ties" theory helps conceptualize this process (Granovetter, 1973). He contends that loosely connected networks, like in the form of acquaintances rather than close friends, play an important role in an individual's integration into a social network and in the case of my research context, it is in the form of a collective influence that bridges the gap between informality and formal institutions. Drinking spaces reinforce these ties like one of the police officers I interviewed calls them "*places to relax... as they take the drinks and chat,*" but they also serve as critical platforms for conflict resolution, mutual support, and resource exchange. Local accounts explain how communal drinking helps settle disputes: "*They called the elders to sit with them, and after drinking together, they resolved their issue.*" In these moments, alcohol shapes both a symbolic and literal space of reconciliation, fostering a sense of kinship among participants.

Yet, these associations remain vulnerable to state interference and structural inequalities.

A Pasha seller remembers how her group dissolved after facing official threats:

We gathered all the women who brew Pasha from our area and agreed that, since many people had been arrested—close to ten people at the time—we might be next. So, we decided to look for a certificate and find ways to get out of this business. We got certified and started having regular meetings. Eventually, our chairlady called someone in the governor's office who responded, 'What do you think? Should we come and arrest you all' ... We wanted to stop selling alcohol, but now they want to arrest us!... People got annoyed, and the group dissolved.

Her story reveals the uncertainty of trust-based coalitions in the face of official harassment. Members often pool funds to bribe authorities or manage legal hurdles, exposing the contradictions of an informal economy that blends resilience with complicity. Gendered

dynamics amplify these contradictions. Women, although central to the brewing and selling of local beverages, face disproportionate risks and stigma. One of them notes, “*Most brewers are women because they have no other way of earning money. But they also face many problems, like harassment and stigma.*” Their efforts to organize illustrate the drive for economic and social survival and underscore the inequalities embedded in these community networks.

These alcohol-mediated associations in Taita-Taveta reflect the delicate interplay of resilience and vulnerability. Participants craft spaces of collective identity and mutual support by forging communal bonds, yet they also grapple with the precariousness of navigating state power, social norms, and economic hardships. These networks illuminate how kinship, dependency, and moral economies converge in marginalized communities’ responses to structural inequalities. In this evolving social landscape, alcohol continues to function as a focal point for solidarity, negotiation, and contestation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I demonstrate alcohol’s pivotal role as a social mediator in Taita-Taveta, showing how it actively shapes community life as both a unifying and divisive force. By connecting the themes explored here to insights from Chapters 3 and 4, I underscore the interplay between alcohol’s material agency and its spatial dynamics. These findings contribute to broader anthropological discussions and provide essential insights for community health interventions and policies that address the vulnerabilities and inequities linked to alcohol consumption (Dietler, 2020; Room, 2005).

I show how alcohol functions as a central actant in Taita-Taveta, mediating kinship ties, fostering trust, and reinforcing obligations while reflecting broader patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Carsten, 2004; Latour, 2005). Alcohol assumes a central role in life-cycle rituals such

as marriage negotiations and funerals, acting as both a material and symbolic medium for reinforcing collective identity and belonging. At the same time, its commercialization introduces tensions between tradition and modernity, revealing how cultural practices adapt to socio-economic pressures (Wilkinson, 2015).

The concept of “*liquid kinship*” provides a critical lens for analyzing the fluid, continually-moving, and adaptive bonds that emerge through shared alcohol consumption. Informal networks of reciprocity, trust, and mutual dependency reveal marginalized communities’ resilience while exposing them to cycles of obligation, economic strain, and moral judgment (Graeber, 2014; Mauss, 1967). Sellers, drinkers, and brewers cultivate relationships that blur the boundaries between economic necessity and social care, fostering both solidarity and precarity (Desmond, 2017; Room, 2005). These practices echo ethnographic insights from studies of alcohol’s role in other cultural contexts, such as the Tsimane people in Bolivia, where alcohol mediates social cohesion and reciprocity (Hooper et al., 2013).

This chapter also highlights the gendered dynamics of alcohol’s socialities. Women’s increasing involvement as brewers, traders, and consumers challenges traditional gender norms and secures financial autonomy, yet it simultaneously exposes them to stigmatization and systemic inequities (Farmer, 2004; Shortt et al., 2017). Their participation reflects agency and vulnerability, illuminating the intersections of gender, power, and dependency. Men, by contrast, dominate public drinking spaces, using these settings to reinforce societal hierarchies while economic hardships reshape familial roles and expectations (Wilkinson, 2015).

I argue that alcohol’s dual capacity to foster inclusion and amplify exclusion reflects broader anthropological insights into material culture and social mediation (Dietler, 2006; Mauss, 1967). Drinking spaces often serve as hubs of belonging and resilience but

simultaneously enforce boundaries that marginalize those unable to meet implicit rules of participation. These dynamics align with Room's (2005) observation that alcohol consumption mirrors and exacerbates existing social inequalities, reinforcing hierarchies within communities.

Finally, I situate alcohol within the broader socio-political and economic landscape of Taita-Taveta, where it operates as a site of contestation and negotiation. Informal associations formed around alcohol demonstrate remarkable adaptability as participants leverage collective identity to resist exclusion and manage precarity. However, such networks remain fragile and are also subject to exploitation, legal harassment, and broader structural inequities that define the region's socio-economic realities (Farmer, 2004).

Thus, the fact is that alcohol is a commodity that has gone beyond serving an economic need within Taita-Taveta to shaping active aspects of identity, power, and belonging within this community. Its role in cultural practices and relational networks provides a complex understanding of how material substances influence social life (Carsten, 2004). By adopting this critical contextual approach, I contribute to broader anthropological discussions of social mediation, showing how alcohol at once sustains and disrupts the communities it permeates. These insights confirm the importance of interventions addressing the cultural, economic, and relational dimensions of alcohol, recognizing its duality to unite and divide, to empower and exclude.

CHAPTER SIX

Liquid Fugitivity and Negotiating Existence

How Illicit Alcohol Economies Thrive and the Navigating of the Regulatory Environment

It is one Monday morning in mid-January of 2024, and I am in the Maweni area of Voi, a low-income neighborhood on the southeastern edge of the central business district. Locals call this area “Chubwi,” a metaphorical reference to mean an area where one can easily sink into the habit of excessive drinking. Around 9:30 am, the place is surprisingly quiet. A woman in her early thirties walks up to me with a tense look, saying, “Leo rada ni chafu,” meaning the local Chief and community policy members have been harassing them since dawn. Most people have, therefore, deserted the area, so business is slow, and the once-busy pathways are nearly empty. I join her and a few others sitting under a tree. Several young men and a woman look hungover as they prepare boiled meat and ugali. One of them handed me an old television frame to sit on and joked that I had arrived in time for their meal. Their main complaint is that the patrol started as early as 2:00 am in the Tanzania area, a neighboring village also known for illicit brews, which was by the police, before resuming here in Maweni at 6:00 am, but this time by the area chief. They compare the Chief to his assistant, complaining that the assistant Chief at least does one patrol and leaves, letting them continue selling. Suddenly, a community policy member, someone I had interacted with before, appeared and called the woman who greeted me, saying the Chief wanted to talk to her. She stands reluctantly and mutters, “Kuna mtu ameniseti aki!” suspecting someone snitched on her. The Chief thinks she is hiding alcohol, known locally as Pasha, in her house. When she leads him inside, they find only two bottles of Mnazi—one empty and one half-full. She quickly gulps what remains. “Leo tunaimwaga yote!” the Chief shouts as he moves on, warning that he will pour out any hidden brew. He sarcastically asks one of the men, “Mumeficha wapi ya leo?” He knows everyone here and jokes about uncovering their hidden stashes. Out of earshot of the Chief, the woman takes me to her cramped room. The stale smell of Mnazi and cigarette smoke hangs in the air. An unmade bed and dirty clothes litter one corner, and empty bottles lie scattered everywhere. She sighs, explaining that in this place, “kuna wanawake wengine hu-snitch,” meaning some female sellers betray others to authorities for their own safety or advantage. Trust here is fragile. Not long after, three police officers in uniform arrive - two wear blue with guns strapped across their chests, and one is in green, tall, and has a scarred face. They look annoyed to find no alcohol since they usually collect bribes from the illicit dens. The woman next to me mutters that if anyone sees her talking too freely to the officers, they will assume she is collaborating with the police. Around noon, a young woman arrives. She’s from the Tanzania area, still drunk, and complains about being on the run since 2:00 am. She shows us fresh marks on her thighs from running through maize farms, desperate to avoid the Chief, who won’t take bribes. “Huyu Chief si kama askari, yeye hawezi kukubali hongo,” she says, preferring to risk arrest by regular officers, who sometimes take bribes. Throughout the day, a pattern emerges: curious onlookers test the waters, only to retreat when they hear the Chief is still around. Sellers bury their brew in hidden holes or store it behind fences, hoping to outwit the patrols. Two expectant women, known for brewing Pasha, complain that they

cannot cover their children's school fees if they cannot sell. Police usually demand a Ksh.200 bribe from sellers of illicit brew, far more than the Ksh.50 they take from legal outlets. The Chief's relentless raids today, however, prevent even that under-the-table arrangement. And, by mid-afternoon, I watched the Chief destroy several jerricans, pouring out Pasha and Chang'aa while burning plastic cups. People who watched this happen joke they wish they were the ground that soaks up the alcohol. When the Chief finally leaves around 3:40 pm, word spreads fast that he has finally left, and in moments, patrons emerge like bees. Someone hauls out a 5-litre jerrican they had hidden, and they share it in plastic cups, draining it almost immediately. Soon, the main sellers, who had been hiding, return. One finds that the authorities have destroyed her cups, jerricans, and sieves. She sighs, buys new supplies, and begins to sell again by late afternoon. Customers, who have gone dry all day, line up eagerly. By 7:00 pm, the fourth jerrican for the day is nearly finished, and the atmosphere has shifted entirely. The air echoes with loud conversations, occasional bursts of laughter, and the clack of plastic cups is hitting the ground. [Monday, January 15, 2024, Voi, Pasha drinking space]

Introduction

The early morning tension described in the opening fieldnote—where community members in Maweni scramble to hide illicit brews and evade the Chief's patrols—offers a vivid entry point into the precarious realities of illicit alcohol economies in Taita-Taveta. This scene of evasion, adaptation, and negotiation captures the fluid interplay of survival strategies within a contested regulatory environment. From dawn's fear-laden stillness to the frantic activity of reemergence in the afternoon, this cyclical rhythm illustrates the resilience and ingenuity underpinning the region's informal alcohol trade.

This chapter examines the dynamics of what I term ***Liquid Fugitivity***, a concept that captures the adaptive strategies employed by brewers, sellers, and community members to navigate the constraints of an often hostile regulatory landscape. Rooted in ethnographic observations and informed by theoretical insights, Liquid Fugitivity builds on Fred Moten's "fugitivity" (Moten, 2003) and Laura Meek's "fugitive science" (Meek, 2023) while offering a unique lens to understand the socio-economic survival tactics within illicit economies. Unlike

static forms of resistance or direct confrontation, Liquid Fugitivity emphasizes the constant motion, recalibration, and interplay of visibility and concealment that define these practices.

This chapter unfolds in five sections. The first provides a historical overview of alcohol regulation in Taita-Taveta, tracing the transition from indigenous communal norms to colonial and post-independence frameworks that marginalized traditional brews. The second section explores the pluralistic enforcement structures—spanning national agencies, county bodies, and grassroots networks—and the fragmented yet overlapping roles they play in regulating alcohol. Next, I introduce the concept of Liquid Fugitivity, differentiate it from related theoretical constructs, and ground it in ethnographic evidence. The fourth section analyzes the socio-economic and cultural factors driving fugitive behaviours, including adaptability, negotiation, and networked strategies. Finally, the chapter reflects on the implications of these dynamics for governance, public health, and community resilience.

By situating the concept of Liquid Fugitivity within the broader socio-political and economic landscape, this chapter aims to move beyond reductive portrayals of illicit alcohol economies as mere defiance of the law. Instead, it frames them as dynamic systems of survival, shaped by systemic inequalities, cultural practices, and the interplay between formal and informal governance. In doing so, the analysis seeks to provide actionable insights for designing inclusive, context-sensitive regulatory frameworks that address both the root causes of illicit economies and the lived realities of those who navigate them.

The Historical Context of Alcohol Legislation in Taita-Taveta

Alcohol regulation in Kenya has long been a site of contention, shaped by colonial legacies, shifting post-independence policies, and contemporary socio-economic realities. The history of alcohol regulation reflects a persistent tension between formal control and informal

resistance (Willis, 2002). Traditional brews—often linked to communal rites and social gatherings—were governed by informal guidelines in earlier periods, reflecting the authority of community elders (Willis, 2002). These guidelines included restrictions on the quantity to be produced, contexts of consumption, and collective responsibilities in monitoring the brewing process. Over time, regulations were increasingly influenced by colonial and later national policies, leading to an enduring conflict between formal state control and local practices (Willis, 2002). Scholars, including Willis (2002, 2006) and Bravman (1998), highlight how these regulatory frameworks intersect with broader political, economic, and cultural structures in Kenyan communities.

Before the colonial incursion, for instance, Taita-Taveta's communities used local alcoholic beverages such as *Mbangara*, aka *Mwasina*, as part of routine subsistence and ceremonial events. Older community members took the lead in deciding when, where, and how these drinks would be shared, providing a form of social regulation that was respected by many. Bill Bravman (1998) points out that Indigenous institutions in Taita followed principles of communal well-being, and alcohol was consumed in ways that reaffirmed such principles and cultural norms. However, with the advent of colonial rule, the missionaries sold the narrative that Africans “did not drink to drink but drank to drunk” (Willis, 2002, p. 95). They hence called for the prohibition of Africans from having alcohol. In turn, policies emerged that targeted African brews as unproductive and harmful. Willis (2002) further notes that authorities aimed to suppress local beverages under the premise of promoting “civilized” consumption while simultaneously encouraging European-imported liquors. What is manifest, however, is that these strategies aligned with broader colonial goals of controlling local economies for administrative and economic advantage. Traditional brewers were thus forced to work secretly, supporting each

other through hidden production and distribution networks – scenes we see even today. In-depth interviews with participants and observations made during my fieldwork in Taita-Taveta, such as what we see from the opening fieldnote above, all underscore how the local people, especially women, have continued to brew *Mbangara* (which has now mainly evolved into *Pasha*), despite police crackdowns.

Following independence in 1963, Kenya maintained a number of colonial-era statutes, including frameworks that limited local brewing. According to Willis (2006), minimal revisions were made to align these laws with new governance structures, but most of the elements remained. The Liquor Licensing Act of 1958, for example, remained a central tool for controlling alcohol production, although it was ostensibly adapted to suit post-independence aspirations of economic growth and public health. Besides, structures such as the multi-sector licensing boards and the chiefs' administrative system are also elements we see that were there even during the colonial period within the context of alcohol regulations and enforcement. In practice, what we see is that these measures inadvertently continued to marginalize small-scale brewers and traders who lack the capital for formal licenses or the means to fulfill bureaucratic requirements. Many turned to brewing *Chang'aa* and *Mbangara*—cheap, home-distilled alternatives—outside the gaze of official institutions. Taita-Taveta's history reveals how women, in particular, relied on these activities as livelihood strategies in the face of limited employment opportunities. Field notes from my observations and in-depth interviews with brewers and other stakeholders show that brewers are somewhat ready to take risks such as police harassment, confiscation and destruction of equipment, and possible imprisonment. One brewer from Mwatate sub-County explained:

Brewing Mbangara is what helps me to sustain our lives. There was a time when I was locked up for four months. I stayed there, then came back. When I came back, I realized

there were no jobs. There was a drought, no food, my mother depends on me, and my brother is mentally unstable. I had to go back to selling alcohol. The police still disturb us, but whenever they come, we give them something.



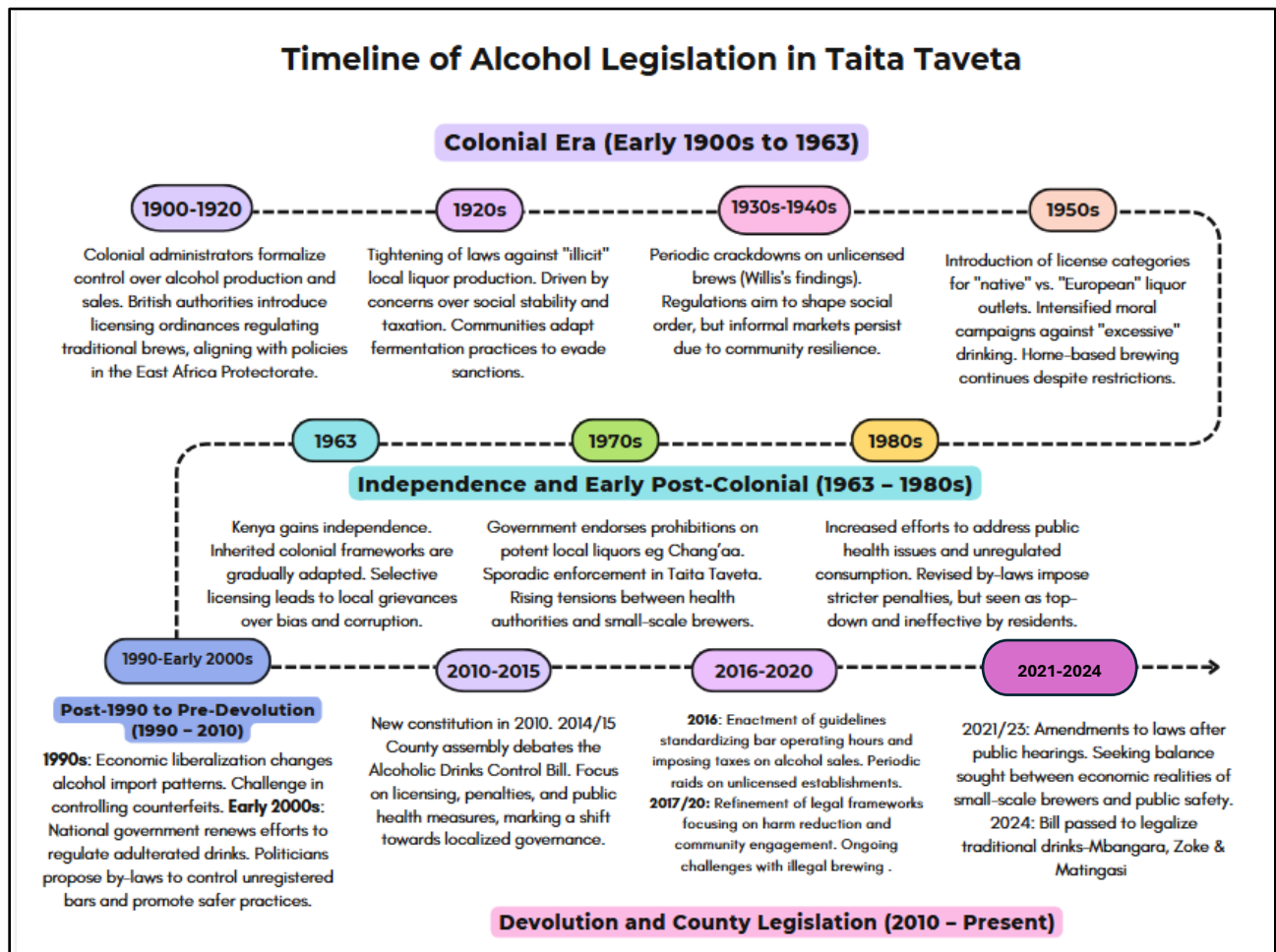
Figure 28: A colonial-era Anglican church built in 1901 in Sagala, Taita Taveta. Now known as the Wray Memorial Museum, it was named after Joseph Wray, the missionary who established it. This structure symbolizes the powerful influence of early missionaries, who condemned local cultural practices and portrayed indigenous brews as threatening Christianity ideals.

So, regarding then the emergence of modern legislation, what we see is that over subsequent decades post-colonization, the state sought to address the perceived problems of illicit alcohol through laws like the *Chang'aa* Prohibition Act of 1980. Although aimed at curbing the production of unsafe beverages, this legislation pushed more brewers underground and led to frequent police raids. Eventually, Kenya replaced the *Chang'aa* Prohibition Act with updated frameworks, most notably the Alcoholic Drinks Control Act (often called the Mututho Law) enacted in 2010. This law imposed stricter operational hours for bars, higher penalties for illegal brewing, and more rigorous licensing processes (National Council for Law Reporting, 2010). While supporters of the Mututho Law point to its public health rationale of reducing excessive consumption and controlling access to harmful brews, critics observe its

disproportionate effects on low-income groups that rely on informal brewing. Similar observations persist even today within the various County Alcoholic Drinks Acts, which are primarily adapted from the national act following the implementation of Kenya's devolved system of government under the 2010 Constitution. For instance, Taita-Taveta County adopted the Mututho Law to come up with the *Taita-Taveta County Alcoholic Drinks Control and Licensing Act 2016* (County Assembly of Taita-Taveta, 2016). However, during the time of my fieldwork, I observed that the county continues to grapple with a growing illicit alcohol economy, fueled by factors such as poverty, cultural practices, and inconsistent enforcement. While state crackdowns (which I learned from the field that increased community complaints regarding excessive drinking often trigger them), occasionally disrupt these activities, brewers often resume their operations once enforcement teams withdraw, reflecting a long-standing pattern of evasion and resistance. Figure 32 illustrates the evolution of alcohol regulation in Taita-Taveta from colonial times to the present, highlighting both continuities and shifts in regulatory approaches.

It is evident that the alcohol landscape in Taita-Taveta continues to be shaped by the interplay of cultural traditions, economic needs, and state policies. The persistent tensions between formal regulatory frameworks and community practices reveal deeper challenges, including the enduring influence of colonial precedents on modern systems and the frequent exclusion of local stakeholders' perspectives on poverty and cultural identity. Historical patterns—from colonial interventions to post-independence policies—suggest that future reforms must prioritize clear legislation and collaborative governance structures, emphasizing community-based approaches.

Figure 29: A timeline for the Taita-Taveta alcohol laws, adapted from various sources, including Willis (2002), NACADA, and the County Assembly of Taita-Taveta.



There is, however, an amendment bill to the 2016 Act —passed by the Taita-Taveta County Assembly in December 2024 and awaiting the County Governor’s assent—seeks to legalize the sale and consumption of traditional liquors, specifically *Mbangara* (for the Taitas) and *Zoke* and *Matingasi* (for the Wataveta) (County Assembly of Taita-Taveta, 2016). This development highlights the ongoing tension between formal regulation and cultural practices. As scholars like Justin Willis (2006) and Bill Bravman (1998) emphasize, alcohol regulation in regions such as Taita-Taveta is deeply intertwined with broader narratives of power, social

transformation, and economic survival. Balancing public health concerns about harmful brews with the realities of local livelihoods requires addressing the legacy of colonial regulations, persistent socio-economic inequalities, and the cultural significance of alcohol in community life. This history underscores the need for any meaningful regulatory shift to incorporate local voices, provide viable livelihood alternatives, and recognize the enduring role of indigenous brews in Taita-Taveta's cultural identity.

The Plurality of Alcohol Regulation and Enforcement Structures

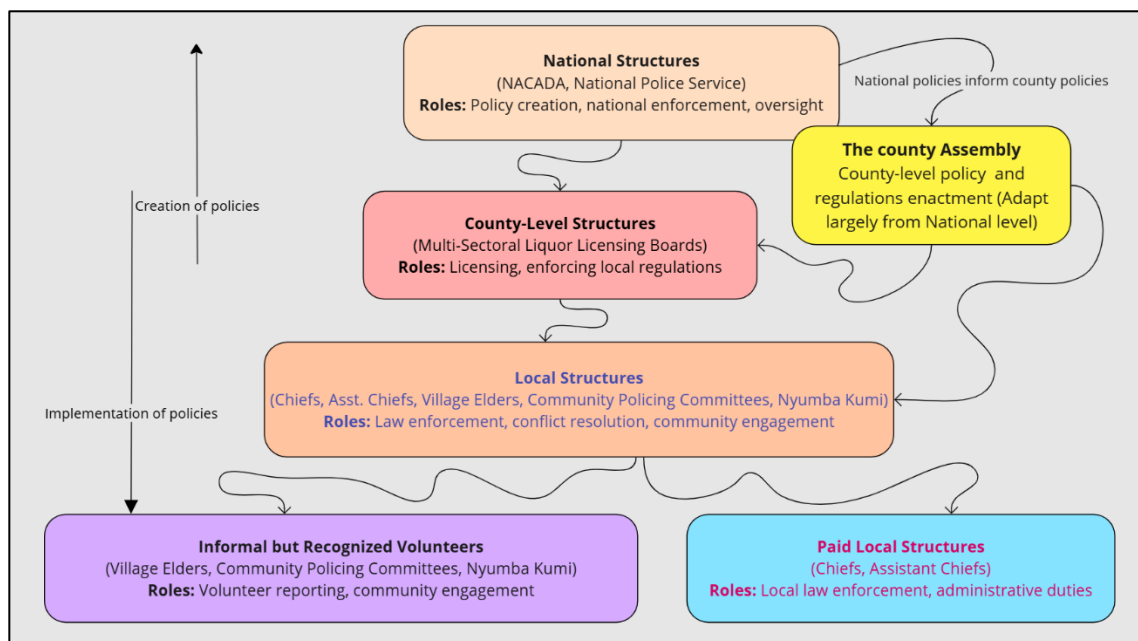


Figure 30: The Hierarchical Alcohol Regulatory and Enforcement Structures of Taita Taveta

Following the above understanding of how the laws governing alcohol production, sale, and consumption in Taita-Taveta developed raises a critical question: How are these laws enforced, and who enforces them? Figure 30 illustrates the hierarchy of alcohol regulation and enforcement. However, while the figure presents these structures hierarchically, the reality is more akin to a sprawling horizontal network than a strict hierarchy. These entities operate on the

same ground, connecting only when necessary or occasionally collaborating. The hierarchy reflects the institutional level of these structures rather than their operational dynamics. In essence, the regulation of alcohol in Taita-Taveta exemplifies the complexities of regulatory pluralism, where multiple governing entities with overlapping mandates and divergent priorities create a fragmented enforcement landscape. So, from what we see in Figure 33, there is a network of formal and informal actors in alcohol regulation, highlighting gaps in enforcement and overlaps that illicit brewers easily exploit (Lyon, 2018). This phenomenon is not unique to Taita-Taveta but reflects broader challenges in regulatory governance, particularly in contexts where state capacity is limited and informal economies thrive. For instance, Sally Engle Merry (1988), in her scholarly work on *legal pluralism*, examines how multiple legal systems co-exist and interact within societies. She draws attention to the fact that there exists a dynamic interaction between state laws and other forms of normative ordering, such as customary, religious, and community-based systems, emphasizing how these multiple legal frameworks shape social regulation and influence everyday life.

The enforcement of alcohol laws reveals a layered system of authority, characterized by gaps, overlaps, and a “negotiated existence” between regulators and regulated actors (Anders & Nuijten, 2017; Das et al., 2004). *Regulatory pluralism* refers to the coexistence of multiple regulatory systems—state, non-state, formal, and informal—that operate simultaneously within the same social space (Merry, 1988; von Benda-Beckmann, 2002). In Taita-Taveta, this pluralism manifests in the interplay between national government agencies, local administrators, county officials, and police units, each with distinct priorities and mechanisms of control. However, as John Griffiths (Griffiths, 1986) notes in his theoretical discussion of *legal pluralism* which he draws upon different contexts, such multiplicity often leads to enforcement gaps and

overlaps, where the lack of coordination between regulatory bodies creates opportunities for evasion and negotiation.

Besides, the regulation of alcohol in Taita-Taveta unfolds across a complex landscape of formal and informal enforcement structures. This multiplicity creates both opportunities and challenges, with enforcement becoming a fluid and negotiated process rather than a rigid, top-down exercise. Illicit brewers and sellers navigate these overlapping layers of authority by exploiting enforcement gaps, leveraging social networks, and engaging in informal negotiations. This dynamic aligns with the concept of *liquid fugitivity*, where survival within contested regulatory environments depends on mobility, adaptability, and the strategic manipulation of power. Similarly, anthropologist Jacob Doherty (2017) in his analysis of the *boda boda* industry in Kampala, Uganda, conceptualizes informal laborers, such as the *boda boda* drivers, as “disposable infrastructure” to mean they are essential to urban economies but are equally structurally marginalized and exposed to systemic risks. This notion of disposability is consistent with the experiences of women brewers in Taita-Taveta, who, while advancing local economies, face regulatory neglect and precarious survival strategies. Their informal operations, often shaped by the gaps in enforcement and the strategies they devise to avoid state sanctions, reflect broader dynamics of disposability where marginalized actors sustain economies while remaining vulnerable to systemic exclusion (Doherty, 2017).

In Taita-Taveta, enforcement is driven by both formal government institutions and informal, community-based structures that are nonetheless recognized by the state. The formal entities include the National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA), the Kenya Police Service, chiefs, and assistant chiefs. These actors wield statutory

authority, with NACADA focusing on policy directives and public health campaigns, while police officers are tasked with crackdowns on illicit alcohol and second-generation brews.

At the same time, the informal but state-recognized actors such as village elders, community policing committees, and the *Nyumba Kumi* initiative play a significant role in enforcement. These groups often operate as intermediaries between the government and local communities, gathering intelligence, organizing patrols, and supporting enforcement operations. At the county and sub-county levels, the county assembly and the liquor licensing boards provide an additional layer of oversight, focusing on legislation, licensing, taxation, and regulating the number and location of alcohol establishments. The liquor licensing boards particularly operate across the county and sub-county levels, ideally integrating public health, law enforcement, and community perspectives into its governance model.

Formal Structures: Centralized Authority with Fragmented Reach

At the highest level, bodies such as NACADA are tasked with setting general guidelines on alcohol control. They are involved in policy formulation, awareness campaigns, and the creation of statutory instruments meant to regulate production and sale across Kenya. NACADA focuses on addressing the harmful use of alcohol through educational programs and support for addiction treatment. However, its presence and impact in certain rural or border areas can be limited due to resource constraints and the challenges of maintaining sustained oversight, hence leaving enforcement to local actors. As one community leader explained: “*NACADA is there, but we rarely see them on the ground. They make the policies, but who enforces them here in the villages? That is left to the chiefs and the police. Even the county has more influence than NACADA in our daily lives.*”

Meanwhile, the Kenya Police Service enforces criminal laws related to unlicensed production, sale and distribution. Officers may carry out crackdowns or roadblocks, seize prohibited drinks, and arrest individuals accused of flouting regulations. Yet, as noted in the opening fieldnote, consistent follow-through is not guaranteed. Together with my research assistants, we observed on different instances during our fieldwork that the Chief at the local level might conduct an intense morning patrol, at the same time other police officers arrive later, expecting to collect bribes rather than follow stringent legal procedures. So, what we see regarding police is that they play a dual role in alcohol enforcement—cracking down on illicit brews while often engaging in corrupt practices. Their presence is marked by periodic raids, during which they confiscate illegal brews, arrest offenders, or, more commonly, accept bribes.

Chiefs and assistant chiefs, on the other hand, are what we can refer to as the frontline enforcers. They are the most visible actors in local alcohol enforcement. On the ground, chiefs and assistant chiefs hold significant authority. They can call upon the village elders, *Nyumba Kumi* initiative leaders and the community policing committees to assist in detecting suspicious activity, coordinate raids, and gather local intelligence. Their influence stems from familiarity with residents and an ability to mobilize quickly. During the early-morning sweeps described in the fieldnote, the local Chief orchestrated a patrol that began well before sunrise, hoping to catch many sellers off-guard. These operations are often characterized by dramatic displays of power—confiscating brewing equipment, destroying stock, and issuing warnings—yet they also open up a space for corruption or selective enforcement depending on individual community leaders and how they relate with their communities.

Informal Structures: Grassroots Governance in Action

In the absence of what would be considered sufficient formal law enforcement capacity, grassroots governance structures—such as community policing committees, village elders, and *Nyumba Kumi* initiative leaders—have emerged as pivotal players in law enforcement across Kenya. In Taita-Taveta, these informal yet recognized actors play a significant role in alcohol control within the county. By leveraging their proximity to the communities they serve, they bridge the gap between official authorities and local needs, enforcing regulations, conducting raids, and fostering collective responsibility. However, their work underscores a complex intersection of commitment, resourcefulness, and systemic limitations in the fight against alcohol abuse. Field observations in Taita-Taveta reveal that the battle against illicit alcohol and broader alcohol control efforts are deeply embedded in a nexus of community-led initiatives and systemic governance challenges. Local leaders must navigate a volatile landscape marked by conflicting interests, resource constraints, and often inconsistent support from formal law enforcement. These dynamics highlight the inherent tensions and contradictions within informal governance structures, which are tasked with enforcing state regulations while simultaneously maintaining community cohesion.

Grassroots governance structures derive legitimacy from their proximity to the communities they serve. Leaders are often selected through community processes, fostering a sense of accountability to their neighbors. However, this proximity also creates inherent tensions. These actors are simultaneously guardians of local order and perceived disruptors of livelihoods tied to illicit alcohol production and sale. This duality manifests in a precarious balance between fostering trust and managing resentment. For instance, grassroots leaders that I spoke with often report being viewed as traitors when enforcing alcohol regulations. Such perceptions are compounded by familial and social ties within the community, making it difficult for these

leaders to act without being accused of betrayal. One of the village elders from a village in Mwatate described the animosity they encountered: *When we're doing a crackdown on the illicit alcohol, they see you with the government—such as the Chief, the police—and think you're the one implicating them. They believe you're contributing to their loss and even disrupting their children's education.*”

Besides, the cultural fabric of Taita-Taveta, where familial bonds are strong, exacerbates this challenge. Many are reluctant to report offenders because they fear the repercussions of implicating kin. This dynamic not only inhibits the flow of information but also perpetuates the informal alcohol trade, as communities prioritize relationships over regulatory compliance. Then with the absence of formal recognition and material support severely limits the efficacy of grassroots actors. While their work is lauded as a form of voluntary public service, the lack of resources—such as airtime to report incidents or transportation to reach brewing sites—diminishes their capacity to act decisively. Without adequate financial or institutional backing, their efforts remain piecemeal and reactive rather than systemic and preventative.

Further compounding these limitations is the systemic corruption within formal law enforcement. Reports of police officers accepting bribes from brewers to overlook illicit activities undermine community trust in both grassroots and institutional governance. One of the community policing committee members explained during an in-depth interview that I had with him: *Some police officers have contributed to alcoholism because... every midmonth and end month, they receive bribes from brewers. Even in baraza [community gatherings], community members keep saying alcohol can't be fought because some police officers take bribes.*”

As a result, this form of corruption perpetuates a cycle in which brewers are encouraged to continue their trade, confident financial inducements can ‘neutralize’ enforcement efforts.

Acutely aware of this dynamic, community members are often discouraged from reporting illegal activities due to their perception of limited tangible benefits or follow-through from authorities. Meanwhile, Illicit brewers in Taita-Taveta demonstrate a remarkable capacity to adapt, leveraging vast terrains and cultural sensitivities to elude detection. Local leaders describe how brewers transport and conceal their products in remote, unconventional, or sacred locations—such as farms, graveyards, and even private homes—further complicating detection efforts at the grassroots level. Consequently, this ongoing evasion underscores the need for constant vigilance and an ever-evolving strategy among grassroots actors, who must adapt their methods to keep pace with the brewers’ ingenuity.



Figure 31: *A picture showing the hilly terrain of Taita Taveta County, where steep slopes and dense vegetation create natural hideouts for illicit brewers and sellers, making law enforcement efforts more challenging.*

However, these efforts are constrained by the voluntary nature of grassroots groups, which creates a paradox: although such actors are indispensable for curbing illicit alcohol, their sustainability is undermined by their informal status. As a result, a critical gap emerges within the formal state apparatus—namely, the inability to address localized issues comprehensively.

While community policing committees, *Nyumba Kumi*, and village elders attempt to fill this gap, their efficacy remains limited by systemic challenges such as corruption, inadequate resources, and insufficient institutional coordination. Ultimately, their experiences highlight the need for a hybrid approach that effectively integrates both formal and informal governance mechanisms.

The County Governance in Alcohol Control

In December 2024, the Taita-Taveta County Assembly passed the *Alcoholic Drinks Control and Licensing (Amendment) Bill, 2024*, aiming to legalize and regulate traditional brews within the county (Taita-Taveta County Assembly, 2024). The amendment is to the 2016 Act, which was adapted from the *National Liquor Control Act of 2010*. This legislative move reflects a significant shift in the county's approach to alcohol regulation, seeking to integrate traditional brews into the formal economy through licensing and oversight. This process brings out the role of the county assembly. The county assembly is responsible for crafting localized legislation that governs the production, distribution, and consumption of alcoholic beverages. The recent amendment bill exemplifies this role by proposing a framework for legalizing and regulating traditional brews, which have historically operated in a legal gray area. The bill outlines specific criteria for licensing traditional brews, including quality control measures, health and safety standards, and designated areas for production and sale.

Once the governor signs the bill into law, its implementation will involve multiple county agencies. Multi-agency liquor boards—comprising representatives from health, security, and administrative departments—will evaluate applications from traditional brewers to ensure compliance with the new regulations. These boards will conduct inspections to verify that production methods meet stipulated health and safety standards. Upon approval, licenses will be

issued through the county administration and revenue offices, effectively bringing traditional brews into the regulated market.

So, what is demonstrated in this is that in addition to the county assembly, there are multi-agency liquor boards at the sub-county and county levels that introduce further layers of regulation through licensing and taxes. Bars, pubs, and other establishments serving legally recognized brands must secure county permits and comply with set operating hours. Officials responsible for issuing licenses collaborate across departments to meet various standards for responsible alcohol consumption. Ideally, these measures ensure product safety, curb harmful consumption, and generate local revenue. However, it is also apparent that the county apparatus often struggles to maintain consistent oversight. In smaller urban centers and rural villages, enforcing county by-laws becomes difficult due to limited personnel and pervasive corruption. Some officially licensed establishments may knowingly allow the sale of home-distilled liquor in backrooms to satisfy local demand. Because the county has a financial stake in collecting revenue, there is tension between enacting outright prohibitions and promoting regulated sales that bolster the budget. This tension explains why, as seen in the opening fieldnote, legal businesses and unlicensed operations often exist side by side, with authorities focusing more on highly visible crackdowns than on establishing sustainable regulation.

Gaps, Overlaps, and “Negotiated Existence”

The coexistence of multiple agencies and layers of authority creates confusion among sellers and producers. One individual might secure an arrangement or license with the county officials but still face arrest coordinated by the liquor licensing boards, who may raise concerns about that agreement. A day can begin with an aggressive patrol by the Chief, followed by independent rounds of uniformed officers seeking payment from anyone still attempting to sell

alcohol. This uncoordinated approach weakens the overall impact of crackdowns, as brewers learn to adapt to specific patrol times, develop warning systems, and pool resources to bribe whoever arrives with the greatest urgency.

In turn, these gaps and overlaps permit a “negotiated existence.” Sellers caught with stock often attempt to negotiate smaller bribes, adjusting their practices based on the perceived risk of the day. Some vow to stop selling altogether, yet return to brewing once a patrol finishes. Others maintain a clandestine setup that remains inaccessible to all but trusted patrons, using female sellers or pregnant women as faces for the operation on the assumption that authorities may be less confrontational. Through these daily adaptations, people quietly sidestep strict regulations, balancing the pressures of enforcement with the economic necessity to keep their enterprises running.

Ultimately, the overlapping responsibilities of state, local, and county authorities give rise to a cyclical pattern of enforcement, characterized by periodic crackdowns followed by inevitable pauses. The community’s response mirrors these fluctuations: when the Chief’s presence disappears, as noted in the fieldnote, patrons swiftly return. A hidden jerrican of *Pasha* reappears, and business resumes as though the raid had been no more than a temporary inconvenience. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for appreciating why illicit alcohol economies persist in Taita-Taveta and how various stakeholders navigate the broader realities of survival, regulatory evasion, and livelihood in marginalized contexts.

Understanding *Liquid Fugitivity* and Its Dynamics and Implications in Taita-Taveta

I introduce the concept of *Liquid Fugitivity* in this chapter to represent a distinct socio-political strategy, blending avoidance, negotiation, and compliance in response to persistent surveillance and regulation. This concept, in the context of my study on the material semiotics of

problem drinking, captures the dynamic and adaptive behaviours of individuals and communities engaged in illicit alcohol economies, where survival hinges on the ability to navigate fluctuating threats. Besides, it also considers the dynamics attendant to law enforcement itself as the enforcers similarly adapt and engage with the ever-changing alcohol production, sale and consumption landscape. So, the gist here is that, unlike just a mere act of avoidance or open defiance, *Liquid Fugitivity* underscores fluid, ever-adapting tactics. The concept embodies constant movement, recalibration, and the interplay of concealment and visibility among all the different actors involved. For instance, brewers and sellers vanish when law enforcement approaches—signaled by neighborhood whispers, *boda boda* riders, in some places, and in some places, even children playing at strategic places, or a sudden shift in collective vigilance. Yet, as soon as the patrols recede, they reemerge, resuming their operations with minimal delay. This cyclical evasion illustrates a rolling survival mechanism that balances resistance with improvisation, ensuring livelihoods persist within constrained margins.

The “liquid” metaphor I use here, therefore, is deliberate as it underscores this perpetual motion and adaptive reconfiguration. Liquids adapt to the contours of their surroundings, filling spaces that are overlooked or deemed inaccessible. Similarly, brewers and sellers exploit gaps in enforcement, utilizing makeshift spaces and transient networks to continue their trade. Crucially, they rely on continuous motion: shifting production times, improvising new and quicker recipes, moving locations, and leveraging on *unsuspect-able* “lookouts” who stand ready to alert them of patrols. For example, while exploring the different alcohol types within the drinking landscape of Taita-Taveta in Chapter 3, I note how traditional brews like *Mbangara*, which require several days to ferment, have given way to quicker alternatives like *Pasha*, which can be served within

hours. This shift exemplifies the adaptability and speed central to Liquid Fugitivity, allowing brewers to generate income rapidly and still be able to evade detection.

So I argue that this concept of Liquid Fugitivity builds on existing scholarly work within broader socio-anthropological studies on evasion and compliance, where scholars such as Scott (1990), in his work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, highlight the hidden transcripts of resistance among marginalized groups, while De Certeau in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life* underscores the tactical improvisations of individuals operating within systems of control (Certeau, 1984). These foundational works, combined with contemporary studies like Keshavarz's *Design-Politics*, which explores covert practices in oppressive regimes (Keshavarz, 2019), and Bayat's *Life as Politics*, which examines how ordinary people navigate authoritarian constraints (Bayat, 2013), provide a robust theoretical backdrop for understanding Liquid Fugitivity's nuanced strategies. Recent work by Shange in *Progressive Dystopia* further enriches this analysis by exploring intersections of marginality, power, and everyday resistance (Shange, 2020). All these converge in the concept of Liquid Fugitivity, which stresses not only the existence of resistance and cunning, but also the unrelenting adaptation, creativeness, and flourishing that illicit traders demonstrate daily.

Additionally, to situate *Liquid Fugitivity* within broader theoretical discourses, it is essential to compare it with two interrelated concepts: fugitivity and Fugitive Science. These frameworks share thematic overlaps yet diverge in their focus and implications. Fred Moten's concept of Fugitivity, for instance, is a notion that stems from more radical traditions within Black studies (Moten, 2003). It emphasizes how marginalized communities resist systemic structures of oppression and foregrounds the refusal to be fully captured by systems designed to exploit or exclude. Fugitive Science by Laura Meek, on the other hand, is a concept that explores

the creative methodologies through which individuals circumvent strict regulation and surveillance, often employing informal, hands-on experimentation (Meek, 2023). The concept focuses on subversive forms of knowledge production, often shared through non-official channels (like improvised distilling techniques or local contraptions that sidestep official scrutiny). So, looking at Liquid Fugitivity, particularly in the context of this study, it builds or expands on both frameworks, whereby it uniquely incorporates elements of resistance and ingenuity but centers on social fluidity and rapid adaptability of brewers and sellers. It reveals the interplay between networked visible and invisible strategies, where open defiance alternates with subtle accommodation in a perpetual motion. A vivid example is found in the opening fieldnote of this chapter, whereby at the first hint of a patrol, both sellers and their patrons have disappeared from the scene, and only a few people who are seemingly on their unrelated businesses remain. The sellers return as soon as they get word that the Chief and his team have left, and they immediately resume trading. This fluidity, driven by local intelligence, *boda boda* riders, and networked communication, underscores the ingenuity of survival within constrained socio-legal landscapes.

Figure 35 is an example of the everyday scenes that underscore the subtle networks that animate relations of power and resistance, as the riders' watchfulness helps illicit traders evade law enforcement. These covert collaborations represent what Shange (2020) describes as "fugitive practices"—tactics of survival and evasion among marginalized groups. Similarly, they resonate with Meek's research on informal economies in East Africa, illustrating how individuals maneuver through precarious conditions to maintain livelihoods.



Figure 32: Motorbikes parked at a strategic vantage point at the entrance to a popular drinking spot, where riders not only wait for customers but also act as lookouts—alerting illicit brewers and sellers of impending raids. Photo by author, October 2023.

Therefore, I present *Liquid Fugitivity* in this context as an inherently social phenomenon, grounded in networks of cooperation, trust, and calculated risk. Its existence depends on the interactions of diverse actors: pregnant women and children who use their perceived vulnerability to deflect suspicion, young men who serve as lookouts, *boda boda* riders who act as early-warning agents, and neighbors who alternate between solidarity and betrayal. This intricate web of relationships facilitates the movement of people and goods while navigating the precarious terrain of illicit economies.

As such, the precariousness of trust is a defining feature of this negotiated system, the existence of which is contingent on these complexities I reveal. For instance, when enforcement intensifies, individuals often pool resources to share bribes or bail out their own in the event of an arrest. Yet suspicions linger: a neighbor might report a competitor to law enforcement, believing it could reduce their own vulnerability, as noted in the opening fieldnote. Nonetheless, associations of sellers and brewers have emerged to collectively negotiate with officials, pooling

bribe payments as a form of “protection fee,” alongside the daily bribes reportedly collected by patrolling police officers—50 shillings from *Mnazi* pubs, 100 from bars, and 200 from illicit brewers (colloquially referred to as *Ya Kanyari*, after a pastor known for asking congregants to “plant a seed” of 310 KES - ~\$2.5 USD). These acts of collective resilience coexist with moments of betrayal, where shifting allegiances underscore the precariousness of survival.

These interplays echo insights from Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, which illuminates the moral economies underpinning such exchanges—demonstrating how reciprocal obligations and social debts can both foster cooperation and fuel betrayal²⁷ (Graeber, 2014). Similarly, studies on surveillance, such as Lyon’s *The Culture of Surveillance*, highlight the pressures shaping social interactions in heavily monitored environments (Lyon, 2018). Taken together, these perspectives underscore the very conditions in which *Liquid Fugitivity* thrives: where trust is constantly negotiated, alliances remain fluid, and actors must adapt to ever-shifting power dynamics in order to survive.

So then, to look at the factors that drive Liquid Fugitivity, we see that adaptability is central to Liquid Fugitivity, where we see that when patrols saturate an area, brewers relocate to more discreet locations, such as forests or abandoned buildings. Storage methods also reflect this adaptability, with alcohol often hidden in unlikely places like repurposed containers, underground pits, farms, toilets, or even respected spaces like graveyards. These shifts illustrate a constant recalibration to minimize risk while maximizing returns. One of the Village elders from Mwatate explained his experience:

Alcohol in places like the farm, you find them underground in someone’s farm. Sometimes, it has been put there on an individual farm. You know someone’s farm is private property; you can’t say maybe something like this has been done. Sometimes, it’s

²⁷ Emerging from competition among parties striving to maintain social standing and honor, situations where if one cannot reciprocate adequately may give rise to feelings of indebtedness, shame, and exclusion.

hidden behind a toilet somewhere you wouldn't think has been hidden. Sometimes, you may find it underground in the house, in a room, and put underground in the house. You won't expect that one can do something like that. Sometimes, you may see that it's dug near a graveyard. It's hidden near a graveyard, a place that's respected, and something like that is kept there, of which you won't expect it to be put in such a place.



Figure 33: *Confiscated Chang'aa in a repurposed soda bottle, held as evidence at the Chief's office. The use of such bottles highlights methods of concealment to evade detection during enforcement. Photo by author, January 2024.*

Equally significant to *Liquid Fugitivity* is negotiation and strategic engagement. Enforcement is not always confrontational. In many cases, brewers and sellers engage in strategic negotiations with officials. Bribes, often collected collectively, serve as a form of informal taxation, allowing operations to proceed under certain conditions. The distinction

between lenient and strict officials further shapes these interactions. Some officers engage directly with informers, paying them to identify brewing operations, while others use this information to stage raids at unpredictable hours, such as 3 am. These adaptations mirror the flexibility of the brewers themselves.

Building on the themes of adaptability and negotiation, another critical factor in *Liquid Fugitivity* is the blurred boundaries between legal and illegal alcohol trade, which complicates enforcement. For example, legitimate pubs may serve unlicensed brews to meet high demand or extend operating hours beyond regulated limits. Counterfeit drinks further obscure these boundaries. In Taita-Taveta, a border county, counterfeit alcohol often enters the market despite border surveillance, blending seamlessly with legal brands. If anything, once in rural areas, these counterfeits are nearly indistinguishable, creating peripheral spaces where enforcement struggles to reach. A police officer in the area explained:

In town, people don't risk losing their businesses because of selling second-generation liquor; but in the interior parts, you may find them like the ones that I've got here. I got them from the XX area since they don't expect the police to reach such places very often. They can't sell them within town. You will get them at the outskirts, where they expect little or minimal police presence.

Complementing the adaptability, negotiation, and legal ambiguities discussed earlier are the social networks that function as liquid channels within this economy. Timely and reliable communication networks are vital to liquid fugitivity. For instance, *boda boda* riders play a significant role, acting as mobile information hubs to warn brewers and sellers of impending raids. A single phone call or whispered warning can alert an entire community, ensuring evidence disappears before authorities arrive. These networks facilitate rapid adjustments, mirroring the dynamic nature of the illicit alcohol economy and preserving its continuity.



Figure 34: Sample crates of counterfeit commercial spirits going by the brand name Half Loaf Vodka that were impounded from a rural pub, as referenced in the interview quoted above. Photo by author, February 2024.

Liquid Fugitivity, therefore, offers a compelling framework in which to for understand the resilience and adaptability of illicit economies within heavily surveilled environments. This concept reveals how marginalized communities navigate constraints with ingenuity and determination by emphasizing fluidity, social negotiation, and strategic engagement. Through adaptability, blurred boundaries, and the mobilization of networks, brewers and sellers sustain their livelihoods, illustrating the enduring interplay between resistance and accommodation in everyday life. Crucially, the adaptability and negotiation central to *Liquid Fugitivity* suggest that future regulatory frameworks must emphasize flexibility and inclusivity to address the root causes of illicit alcohol economies.

Rethinking Governance to Advance “Public” Health

The pervasive illicit alcohol economies in Taita-Taveta represent a critical intersection of governance failures and community disenfranchisement. Inconsistent enforcement practices

undermine the legitimacy of state institutions, as community members perceive law enforcement as performative and transactional rather than reformative or protective. Raids often serve as opportunities for officials to extract fines or bribes, further entrenching perceptions of corruption. These practices not only delegitimize the rule of law but also exacerbate community disenfranchisement, fueling distrust in state-led public health and safety initiatives. This erosion of trust complicates the implementation of community-driven policies, as residents are less likely to engage with initiatives they perceive as disingenuous or misaligned with their lived realities.

Additionally, the targeting of producers and consumers of illicit alcohol through punitive measures alienates vulnerable populations, painting them as criminals rather than individuals driven by systemic economic constraints. The resulting tension between enforcement agencies and the community fosters an adversarial relationship, hindering collaborative efforts to address the root causes of illicit trade and its associated health risks. This dynamic creates a cyclical problem: enforcement intensifies underground operations, which, in turn, amplifies community mistrust.

To address the multifaceted challenges posed by illicit alcohol economies, therefore, a shift from punitive enforcement to holistic and integrative strategies is imperative. Licensing traditional brews²⁸ through frameworks such as the proposed 2024 amendment to the Taita-Taveta Alcoholic Drinks Control Act could stand in the gap as it could be a viable path toward formalizing these economies. It is, however, not so clear what the implications could be because

²⁸ I point out here that the local brew being considered for licensing under the 2024 Amendment Bill is *Mbangara*. However, even if the bill becomes law, it does not guarantee that the broader problem of illicit alcohol production and consumption will be resolved. Other brews, such as *Pasha* and *Chang'aa*, will remain illegal. Moreover, not all brewers will likely transition to producing *Mbangara*, as the licensing process entails additional economic burdens that may render it unviable for some. This is particularly significant given that *Pasha* is easier and cheaper to produce, making it a more accessible option for illicit brewers. As such, the production and consumption of illicit brews are likely to persist despite the proposed regulatory changes.

it is also possible that licensing the local brews may lead to an increase in production costs, meaning brewers can still resort to illicit options. Because implementing licensing frameworks faces significant barriers. Corruption within enforcement agencies often undermines trust and compliance, as observed in other contexts of informal governance (Keshavarz, 2019; Scott, 1990). Increased costs for licensing could deter small-scale brewers, while cultural stigmas against regulated brews may reduce acceptance without adequate community engagement campaigns. But all in all, the move to formalize the traditional brews also presents an opportunity to incorporate public health safeguards, including mandatory quality control checks, standardized production methods, and health education campaigns. By fostering transparency and compliance among producers, licensing can mitigate the health risks associated with illicit brewing while preserving cultural practices tied to traditional beverages.

Economic support mechanisms, such as microloans and cooperative business models, present a promising pathway for empowering vulnerable groups, particularly women brewers, to transition from informal alcohol production to regulated and sustainable livelihoods. These alternatives should be paired with skill development programs targeting youth and women, equipping them with the tools to diversify their income sources and reduce reliance on illicit alcohol sales. However, it is important to note that, while these immediate interventions are critical, the sustainability of such programs depends on broader systemic changes. A recurring theme from the interviews with the various stakeholders highlights the pressing need for large-scale industrial investments within Taita-Taveta. Participants repeatedly emphasized the lack of employment opportunities as a significant driver of alcohol production and consumption. For instance, one of the administrators in the area argued that establishing factories could help mitigate this issue: *“If factories were available, then they [the youth] would be employed and*

forced to care for their work... The solution is to assist the youth in getting employment through the factories.”

This sentiment is echoed in calls for leveraging the county’s abundant natural resources, such as minerals, agricultural potential, and tourism opportunities. One community member suggested creating industries to process local minerals and other raw materials within the county to generate employment and income, stating, *“We have plenty of minerals here... industries should be introduced... such that they are not briefly worked on then transported, no; the processing should be done here.”* This approach would also address the dependency on informal brewing, as alternative employment would engage potential producers and consumers in more structured economic activities and perhaps ensure the production and consumption of quality and safer brews. Additionally, for a more sustainable shift, structural reforms to address systemic inequalities and inefficiencies will be crucial. These include ensuring the rigorous enforcement of licensing laws, enhancing the accountability of law enforcement, and prioritizing community-driven initiatives.

Embedding Resilience Through Community Participation

The concept of *Liquid Fugitivity*, which is about the adaptive, networked strategies communities employ to navigate systemic inequities, provides a valuable lens for designing interventions that align with local realities. Recognizing the resilience and ingenuity inherent in these practices allows policymakers to craft solutions that build on existing community structures rather than imposing external frameworks. For example, a more adapted and focused community-led monitoring system beyond what is there could serve as an alternative to top-down enforcement, empowering residents to grow community businesses with safety standards, or even self-regulate and report unsafe practices without fear of reprisal.

Collaborative governance models that actively engage community leaders, traditional brewers, healthcare providers, and enforcement agencies can bridge the persistent divide between state institutions and local populations. Presently, existing frameworks tend to marginalize traditional brewers, often portraying them as adversaries rather than integral members of the community capable of contributing to sustainable solutions. This exclusion fosters distrust and undermines the potential for holistic interventions. Therefore, incorporating traditional brewers into governance structures would create opportunities for meaningful partnerships that are both culturally sensitive and economically viable. Such inclusive approaches would not only address the socio-economic drivers of illicit alcohol production but also foster mutual trust and accountability between stakeholders. By leveraging the knowledge and experiences of brewers alongside the resources and expertise of healthcare providers and enforcement agencies, these models can develop interventions tailored to the unique needs of local communities. This shift from adversarial relationships to cooperative engagement is critical for implementing solutions that resonate with the population while ensuring long-term success and community engagement.

Balancing Public Health, Economic Inclusion, and Cultural Integrity

To achieve sustainable and equitable regulation of alcohol economies in Taita-Taveta, a delicate balance between public health priorities, entrepreneurial drive, and cultural preservation is required. Licensing systems must be designed to protect traditional knowledge and practices, ensuring that modernization does not erode the cultural significance of beverages like *Mbangara* and *Mwasina*. Simultaneously, public health measures must prioritize consumer safety without alienating producers, who often operate under economic duress. And, if we embed these considerations into policy frameworks, Taita-Taveta can create a regulatory environment that not

only addresses the immediate risks of illicit alcohol economies but also fosters long-term economic and social resilience. This approach, rooted in inclusivity and adaptability, offers a model for other regions grappling with similar challenges, underscoring the potential for localized solutions to drive systemic change.

Conclusion

In examining the dynamics of illicit alcohol economies in Taita-Taveta, this chapter illustrates the resilience and adaptability that characterize Liquid Fugitivity. By navigating regulatory pressures through a combination of evasion, negotiation, and partial compliance, community members sustain livelihoods within constrained socio-legal environments. The overlapping of formal and informal economies, coupled with inconsistent enforcement, underscores the complexity of these systems and their deep entanglement with local socio-economic realities.

The persistence of these economies highlights the need for more nuanced regulatory frameworks that engage local voices and address systemic inequalities. Collaborative policy approaches that integrate public health, economic development, and community empowerment are essential to addressing the root causes of illicit alcohol economies. The concept of *Liquid Fugitivity*, therefore, serves as a lens for exploring how marginalized communities navigate and reshape systems of control, offering insights into similar dynamics in other contexts. By moving beyond simplistic portrayals of deviance, this framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between survival, resistance, and adaptation. Building on Graeber's (2014) insights into moral economies where debt is understood not just an economic transaction but also as a moral obligation interwoven within social relations, regulatory reform must be grounded in trust and reciprocal obligations. Industrial investments in local resources,

such as Taita-Taveta's abundant minerals and agriculture, can reduce dependence on illicit alcohol by fostering alternative livelihoods. Coupling these with inclusive policymaking will create sustainable pathways to address the root causes of the Liquid Fugitivity observed in the county and beyond.

CHAPTER SEVEN

***“It Almost Put Me in the Grave”*: Alcohol, the Body, and the Politics of Drinking and**

Recovery

Introduction

I made a decision in my heart and said, ‘I am going to stop drinking.’ You see, my father kept telling me, “Your brothers and I are doing just fine, and we don’t even drink.” So, I thought, let me try stopping for two or three days and see how it goes. I soon realized that I was actually saving money. But the reality is, when you quit drinking, you have to stay away from friends and the places where alcohol is sold. I stayed away for three days but thought, ‘No, my friends are still there.’ So I went back to sit with them. At home, I was surrounded by people who, to me, had nothing to offer, while my friends were at the Mnazi pub drinking. That’s when I started feeling the pull of the devil: What are you doing here? You have money in your pocket, yet you are staying at home with people who offer you nothing. Just go. So, I went back [and continued drinking]. But in the end, I became sick. In a way, it helped because my body was in pain, but I no longer felt the urge to drink. I could see alcohol, but I didn’t crave it. Plus, I was on medication and was instructed not to drink because alcohol and medicine don’t mix. Each morning, I would wake up, shower, have breakfast, and then go for a workout by walking four or five kilometres before coming back to rest. In the first, second, and third weeks of taking medication, I noticed changes. After a month, I felt stronger. By the second month, I had stopped using alcohol completely. I made the decision to quit for good. After abstaining for two months, my appetite returned, and I could finally sleep normally. I also realized that if you truly want to quit drinking, you have to degrade alcohol in your mind. You have to say, “Is this what people drink and then misbehave? Is this what people drink and go home to beat their wives? Why drink this? It’s poison. It makes people sick, yet they still consume it.” Once you degrade it, you find that you are no longer interested in it. That’s how you stop drinking. If a friend invites you to drink, you ask them, “What benefit does this bring me? Give me something healthy, not poison and death.” They’ll say, “How can you say this when you used to drink”? And I tell them, “I’ve realized that alcohol is poison because it nearly destroyed me—it almost put me in the grave. How is that not poisonous?” But because they haven’t realized it yet, I try to educate them before it brings them down too. “Leave it alone. It is poison.”

This is Mwakucha’s narrative explaining his journey to sobriety after 20 years of struggling with alcohol addiction. His story lingers in my mind as I write this chapter because it is not just a personal account of drinking and quitting but an intuitive description of alcohol’s grip on the mind-body. His words, *“It almost put me in the grave,”* are not just metaphorical exaggerations

but also speak to the embodied toll of alcohol consumption in Taita-Taveta: the gradual poisoning of the body, the slow breakdown of relationships, and the psychological struggle between social belonging and self-preservation. His recognition of alcohol as poison is more than just a shift in perception; it is a reconfiguration of his bodily self, a rejection of a substance that once defined his daily rhythms.

Mwakucha's withdrawal was not just a test of personal willpower; it was an embodied crisis. The tremors, sleep disturbances, and physical weakness he endured were not simply symptoms but evidence of how deeply alcohol had inscribed itself onto his body. His experience aligns with what biomedical discourse categorizes as Alcohol Withdrawal Syndrome (AWS), where chronic drinkers experience physical and neurological deterioration when they don't drink. At its most severe, withdrawal leads to delirium tremens (DTs)—marked by seizures, hallucinations, and autonomic collapse—often fatal without medical intervention (APA, 2013).

However, healthcare access in Taita-Taveta is deeply stratified by class, compounding these withdrawal risks. Lower-income drinkers who develop alcohol-related liver disease, gastrointestinal complications, or withdrawal symptoms often lack access to medical intervention, leading to higher mortality rates and prolonged suffering. Meanwhile, wealthier individuals, even when consuming alcohol at similar rates, are more likely to seek treatment, manage symptoms with medical support, and maintain social functionality. This disparity highlights that alcohol's inscription on the body is not just a matter of personal consumption but a reflection of broader inequalities in health, economic access, and regulatory oversight.

Beyond the physical symptoms, alcohol withdrawal can lead to severe psychiatric distress, including alcohol-induced depression, heightened anxiety, and cognitive impairments (Koob & Volkow, 2016). These mental health struggles for individuals who have quit drinking

often increase the likelihood of relapses, as drinkers find themselves unable to manage the psychological toll of withdrawal without proper support. Despite the high burden of alcohol withdrawal in Taita-Taveta, medical interventions for withdrawal management (such as benzodiazepine tapering, psychological counselling, and harm reduction programs) are largely absent in local public healthcare systems. The class-based stratification of healthcare access means that while wealthier individuals can mitigate the bodily and psychological harms of alcohol with medical support, lower-income drinkers are left to navigate withdrawal in isolation, reinforcing cycles of dependency. This gap in care forces drinkers into cycles of quitting and relapse, sustaining long-term bodily harm and reinforcing dependency.

Alcohol in Taita-Taveta is not just a habit or a personal vice; it is an act of embodied survival within a landscape of structural abandonment (Garcia, 2010). For young men, drinking *Chang'aa*, for instance, is not just about intoxication—it is also a claim to endurance in conditions of economic hardship (Bourgois, 2003). For women, brewing, be it *Pasha*, *Chang'aa*, or *Mbangara*, is not just a livelihood; it is a gendered economy of care, where alcohol sustains households while simultaneously exposing them to state policing and moral surveillance (Lovell, 2002). Quitting alcohol is not merely an act of willpower—it is a disruption of social embeddedness, an economic crisis, and, for some, a bodily risk too great to take without some form of institutional support.

Mwakucha's story of quitting alcohol, as narrated, can easily be framed as an act of personal willpower, a journey of self-discipline, and moral reformation. His words, '*It almost put me in the grave*,' not only capture the physical toll of alcohol consumption but also expose the deeper social contradictions at play. His experience invites critical questions that a number of medical anthropologists raise: Is alcohol recovery truly a matter of individual choice, or is it

shaped by economic, political, and structural realities that make sustained sobriety difficult? (Heath, 1958, 1987; Room et al., 1984; Singer et al., 1992)

Mainstream recovery narratives frame sobriety as a moral victory, obscuring the structural realities that make quitting impossible for many. Mwakucha's ability to stop drinking depended on economic and spatial stability; for him, he had access to food, physical space, and an alternative routine, which are privileges that many drinkers may not have. Yet, the dominant model continues to frame alcohol cessation as a marker of social redemption, ignoring that alcohol is not just a substance but a mechanism of survival, pain relief, and social connection (Garcia, 2010). Psychiatric and public health interventions assume that alcohol use is an individual disorder rather than a structural symptom of abandonment (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009). If the goal is recovery, it must extend beyond alcohol cessation to address the economic and social conditions that make drinking a necessity. Because, without economic alternatives, stable housing, or medical support, quitting alcohol is not an act of self-discipline but a negotiation with survival itself.

Furthermore, by positioning alcohol as a "poison" that must be rejected, such recovery narratives risk reinforcing stigma against those who continue to drink, particularly individuals who drink out of necessity rather than choice. As seen in Chapter 5, alcohol consumption in Taita-Taveta is often tied to economic survival, social belonging, and relief from stress or trauma. For those with limited access to employment, stable housing, or mental health support, quitting drinking may be desirable but structurally unattainable.

Therefore, rather than viewing recovery as solely a matter of personal discipline, it is crucial to recognize the systemic factors that sustain alcohol dependency. Without public health infrastructure, harm reduction programs, or economic alternatives, individual stories of quitting,

while inspirational, do not translate into practical solutions for the wider community of alcohol-dependent individuals. By shifting the focus from moral reform to structural intervention, recovery can be understood not as an isolated personal choice but as a process shaped by broader political and economic conditions.

In this chapter, I shift focus to the body to explore how alcohol becomes inscribed onto the body—not just biologically but also through social, economic, and political processes. Drawing from embodiment theory (Csordas, 1994; Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987) and critical public health approaches, I analyze alcohol as a force that both sustains and damages bodies. The discussion interrogates key contradictions: Why is *Mnazi* celebrated as a “healthy” drink while *Chang’aa* or *Pasha* is demonized as “poison”? Why is alcohol both a medium of social connection and a driver of family breakdowns? And does sobriety truly signal moral transformation, or is it constrained by structural realities? By engaging with these tensions, I position alcohol not merely as a substance but as an active participant—an *actant*—also shaping the material-semiotics of bodily experiences, public health discourses, and state interventions.

Drinking as an Embodied Condition

To drink is to feel; as such, we say drinking is fundamentally an embodied experience. Alcohol burns the throat, warms the stomach, numbs pain, and slows the limbs. It alters perception, turning ordinary conversations into laughter-filled exchanges and strangers into friends at the drinking space. Yet, alcohol’s influence and impact extend far beyond the brief sensations of intoxication. The tremors of withdrawal, the morning hangovers, and the swelling of the belly and face (common observations noted in the context of Taita-Taveta) serve as constant reminders that alcohol does not simply pass through the body. Rather, it lingers in the bloodstream, reshaping flesh and changing the way in which people move, work, and, ultimately,

face mortality. This intimate and enduring relationship between alcohol and the body invites us to consider not only the immediate pleasures and pains of drinking but also its long-term effects on health, identity, and social interaction.

Public health narratives frame alcohol consumption as a biomedical crisis, emphasizing its toxicity while overlooking the broader conditions that drive drinking. For instance, while *Mnazi* and *Mbangara* (in the recently passed amendment on the Taita-Taveta Alcohol and Licensing Act) are accepted as part of local traditions, illicit brews like *Chang'aa* and *Pasha* are criminalized, and it is not necessarily because they are chemically different, but because they operate outside state control. The fear of methanol poisoning, neurological damage, and organ failure (WHO, 2018) is legitimate, but it obscures the reality that harm is not inherent to alcohol itself. The real danger comes from unregulated production, economic precarity, and the absence or liminality of harm reduction measures. Instead of fixating on prohibition, policymakers should ask why people turn to these brews in the first place and whether the real crisis is alcohol, or the systemic neglect that forces drinkers toward the cheapest, most dangerous options.

One of the most striking contradictions in alcohol discourse in Taita-Taveta is the distinction between *Mnazi* as “healthy” and *Chang'aa* or *Pasha* as “poison.” While elders view *Mnazi* as ‘*pombe ya heshima*’ (a respectable drink) associated with medicinal and social benefits, illicit spirits like *Chang'aa* are demonized as ‘dangerous and disruptive.’ However, this binary is not simply based on chemical composition, it is also a product of social and political regulation. Because while *Mnazi* is a fermented beverage with relatively low alcohol content (2-4%), its classification as “healthy” and even its presence in formalized drinking spaces, as seen in Figure 38 below, is shaped by its legal status and perceived alignment with cultural practices.



Figure 35: Bottles of Mnazi displayed on the shelves in a local Mnazi pub. While considered a 'respectable' drink with medicinal and social benefits, its distinction from illicit brews like Chang'aa is not solely chemical but also shaped by historical and political regulation. Photo by author, September 2023.

By contrast, *Chang'aa* and *Pasha*, despite being distilled and brewed versions of local brews, are criminalized and subject to police surveillance. This contradiction reveals that state concerns over alcohol are not purely about toxicity—we can argue that they are also about the regulation of bodies, spaces, and economic activities.

Furthermore, the perceived medicinal properties of *Mnazi*—such as its association with boosting appetite and digestion—stand in stark contrast to the moral panic surrounding *Chang'aa* or *Pasha* consumption. Yet both forms of alcohol alter the body in significant ways, blurring the boundary between medicine and poison. These distinctions, therefore, reflect historical, economic, and regulatory priorities rather than objective biomedical truths. By interrogating these contradictions, we see that alcohol's effects on the body cannot be understood outside of their cultural, economic, and political entanglements.

Anthropologists have long argued that the body is never purely a biological entity but is continually shaped by social, economic, and political forces (Lock & Farquhar, 2007; Scheper-

Hughes & Lock, 1987). In this view, the body functions as a site of both personal experience and cultural inscription. Csordas (1994) conceptualizes embodiment as the most pragmatic foundation of culture, meaning that in the context of alcohol consumption, drinking cannot be reduced to individual choice or a biomedical disorder. Instead, drinking is an embodied practice that is deeply interwoven with relationships, survival strategies, and local moral economies. Thus, by examining alcohol consumption through this lens, we acknowledge that the physical sensations of drinking are interconnected with the socio-cultural contexts in which they occur, thereby challenging reductionist approaches that overlook the complexity of lived experience.

Alcohol as an Actant and the Embodied and Social Inscriptions of Drinking

As we saw in Chapter 3, alcohol in Taita-Taveta is more than a chemical substance; it is an actant that shapes and reshapes social and biological bodies alike (Latour, 2005). It mediates intergenerational ties, social belonging, economic survival, and state control. Here, I extend this analysis by arguing that alcohol actively reconfigures endurance, dependency, and embodied social identities, affecting people beyond intoxication.

For many drinkers, alcohol does not simply create fleeting experiences; it also transforms their bodies over time, whereby it enters the bloodstream, lingers in metabolic rhythms, reinforces habitual endurance, and accelerates physical deterioration. The tremors and insomnia of withdrawal, fluctuations in weight, and bloated bellies are not just symptoms of excessive consumption; they serve as evidence of alcohol's deep-seated inscription on the body. Alcohol does not just pass through—it remains, alters, and marks the flesh long after consumption ends.

It is worth acknowledging, however, that these bodily transformations do not occur uniformly; the geography of drinking also determines how alcohol inscribes itself onto bodies. As discussed in Chapter 4, drinking spaces in Taita-Taveta vary; from regulated bars to

clandestine *Chang'aa*, *Mbangara*, and *Pasha* dens. These spaces do more than just provide a setting for drinking; they actively structure how, when, and under what conditions alcohol acts upon the body. In urban settings, for instance, where regulatory risks and police crackdowns force hurried drinking, consumers are likely to experience higher rates of acute intoxication, alcohol poisoning, and severe withdrawal symptoms. Conversely, in rural settings, drinking is likely to follow a more ritualized and prolonged rhythm, reinforcing sustained endurance over episodic bingeing. Thus, alcohol's effects stem not only from biochemistry but also from social, spatial, and economic conditions. Drinking patterns are not random; class, environment, and access to regulated alcohol markets actively shape them.

Embodied Drinking and the Endurance of Masculinity and Social Relations

The discussions on *liquid kinship* in Chapter 5 demonstrate that alcohol does not simply move through individual bodies; it flows through kinship networks, economies of care, and social obligations. Drinking often embeds itself within moral economies, where dependency extends beyond a physiological state to a broader social condition. Withdrawal, for instance, rarely occurs in isolation. Instead, families, economic constraints, and gendered expectations shape and mediate the recovery process. In many households, alcohol remains both a source of income and a cause of suffering. Women brew it while men consume it, making alcohol an economic necessity that simultaneously sustains and drains families. This contradiction highlights why quitting alcohol is not simply a matter of personal choice—it confronts and disrupts entire kinship networks and economic structures. Thus, the body in alcohol recovery does not merely detoxify; it renegotiates its place within a complex social and economic world, responding to family expectations, survival strategies, and shifting gender dynamics.

In the context of Taita-Taveta, the relationship between alcohol and the body follows both gendered and classed patterns, revealing how social hierarchies inscribe themselves onto bodies through drinking practices. For men, for instance, consuming *Chang'aa* is not only about intoxication but also serves as a test of resilience. The ability to “hold one’s alcohol” without incapacitation acts as a marker of toughness. In drinking spaces, alcohol consumption becomes a performance of masculinity, where endurance measures social worth. A young man from Mwatate describes this dynamic:

When we’re at the drinking dens, my friends say I drink much more than they do. For instance, while some people can only manage one bottle or one and a half before they’re drunk, I can handle three bottles and still be able to walk home and have a meal. You see, Chang’aa is a very strong, bitter alcohol. One day, I had an extra bottle and got so intoxicated that I couldn’t walk; it made me wonder why I’m fine when I stick to three bottles. Since then, I’ve made it a point to stop at three bottles so that I can feel okay the next day. I started with just one goblet and gradually built up to three bottles, but I really wish to reach six bottles so that I will be drinking more alcohol than others. In our circle, when we share stories, people usually boast about drinking one, two, or three bottles ... that’s how I ended up at three.

His account illustrates how alcohol consumption follows structured social rules, where drinking serves as a competitive measure of masculinity. However, this endurance comes at a high physical cost because studies link heavy episodic drinking to higher risks of liver cirrhosis, cardiovascular disease, and alcohol-induced neurological impairment (WHO, 2018). Besides, Lower-income men face greater exposure to toxic, unregulated alcohol, increasing their likelihood of serious health complications. Among wealthier men, alcohol consumption is often less visible, occurring in controlled environments where excess drinking does not threaten social or professional status. This disparity means poorer men’s bodies bear the heaviest burden of alcohol-related harm, as economic hardship, lack of medical access, and exposure to adulterated brews intensify their risks.

Gendered Stigma and the Surveillance of Women's Drinking Bodies

If men's excessive drinking signals resilience, women's drinking, in contrast, signals deviance and failure. A man who drinks to excess is seen as strong, but a woman who does the same is disgraced, shamed, and deemed unfit for social life. This double standard is not just a cultural contradiction; it is a system of control. In a society where men dominate public spaces, alcohol consumption becomes another means of regulating who belongs and who does not.

However, the criminalization of illicit alcohol production and consumption disproportionately affects lower-income individuals, compounding these gendered inequalities. As discussed in Chapter 6, police raids on informal brewing operations do not address the economic need that sustains illicit production—instead, they punish those who are already marginalized. In this way, alcohol is both a symptom and a consequence of economic inequality, shaping bodily vulnerabilities in ways that extend beyond personal health into legal, economic, and social precarity. For women brewers, criminalization not only deepens financial hardship but also exposes them to heightened risks of state violence, including police harassment and extortion, reinforcing their economic and social subjugation.

Beyond the legal and economic precarity of women brewers, the biological consequences of alcohol consumption further reinforce their vulnerability. Sustained alcohol consumption depletes the body, leading to severe long-term health complications. The liver, which processes ethanol, becomes overwhelmed, resulting in fatty liver disease, hepatitis, fibrosis, and, ultimately, cirrhosis (O'shea et al., 2010). This deterioration is not only a consequence of prolonged drinking but is exacerbated by the toxic, unregulated nature of many illicit brews. As one community leader in Mwatate claimed:

The other effects caused by alcohol, most of them once they drink, especially these third-generation liquors, are harmful to human health, especially the kidneys, because these

are not certified by Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS), and therefore most people who consume it get diseases such as kidney failure, and the kidneys are unable to function properly since the substances used in brewing the liquor are too strong for the body.

This biological harm intersects with gendered stigma. While men who suffer from alcohol-related illnesses may still be perceived as victims of addiction, women's bodies bear a different burden—one that is interpreted as both a moral and biological failure²⁹. Health deterioration among women drinkers is often read through the lens of neglect, shame, and irresponsibility, reinforcing stereotypes that position female drinkers as reckless and unfit for family life. A local chief describes this perceived “problem” with women's drinking:

Some of them were married or had relationships with men, but because of their drinking habits, they ended up having extra children and lacked the ability to manage them. As a result, you will find that one gentleman runs away from his partner, leaving her with the full responsibility of taking care of the kids. If you visit those particular homesteads, you'll notice that most of the occupants are young mothers, and when you ask them where their husbands are, they readily admit that they are not married, even though they have a family. You cannot have a family without an engagement with a man, with someone from the opposite sex. Consequently, many of these children were either born out of wedlock or their mothers gave birth out of wedlock. This trend is ongoing, and if it is not stopped, we will continue to see these kinds of family setups in our area.

This moral panic over women's drinking exposes deeper anxieties about gender, sexuality, and control. While men's drinking is normalized, women's intoxicated bodies are criminalized, policed, and shamed. For example, women who drink publicly, especially in illicit dens, risk sexual harassment, financial exploitation, and even police targeting. Similarly, men's drunkenness is tolerated, but women's drinking is treated as a moral disorder—a breakdown of kinship roles and domestic responsibility.

This dynamic is further exacerbated by the economic, legal, and now biological precarity that women face within the illicit alcohol economy. While men's drinking often reinforces their

²⁹ Similar to Maureen Murney's (2009) findings in Western Ukraine where she found that addiction is experienced differently between men and women, whereby societal norms and expectations impose a heavier stigma on women who consume alcohol, often labeling them as morally deficient.

social belonging, women brewers and drinkers are positioned as morally corrupt and legally vulnerable. In criminalizing their role in alcohol production and consumption, the state not only dictates who has the right to drink but also who has the right to survive economically.

Meanwhile, the bodily harm caused by unregulated alcohol—ranging from liver disease to kidney failure—further entangles their vulnerability within the cycle of structural abandonment.

The embodied effects of alcohol in Taita-Taveta cannot be understood apart from their social, spatial, and political entanglements. Alcohol reshapes bodies not only through intoxication but also through endurance, withdrawal, and long-term metabolic damage. Drinking spaces structure how alcohol is experienced, shaping patterns of risk, tolerance, and bodily deterioration. Alcohol consumption remains deeply gendered, as men's drinking often signifies masculinity and resilience, while women's drinking is stigmatized as deviant. Meanwhile, the bodies of drinkers and brewers become sites of state surveillance, economic vulnerability, and social control.

Studying alcohol in Taita-Taveta, therefore, means examining its intimate inscription on the body—not just in biological terms but through social expectations, regulatory structures, and intersecting class and gender inequalities. Alcohol is not merely a substance but an actant, a force that simultaneously sustains and deteriorates, binds and isolates, empowers and destroys.

The Politics of the Drinking Body

The policing of alcohol in Taita-Taveta is, in many ways, the policing of bodies. Police raids on illicit brewing sites are not just about eliminating dangerous alcohol; they are performances of state power, where the bodies of brewers and drinkers become visible evidence of criminality and disorder. For instance, consider the scene described in the opening field note of the same Chapter 6, where a local chief during a crackdown shouts, “*Leo tunaimwaga yote!*”

(Today we are pouring everything!)”, while moving through an illicit brewing den. His sarcastic question to one of the men, “*Mumeficha wapi ya leo?* (Where have you hidden today’s stock?),” shows that these crackdowns go beyond standard law enforcement actions; they serve as biopolitical interventions (Foucault, 1991), where state power does not merely prohibit certain behaviours but also acts on the bodily will of those who depend on alcohol economies for their survival.

Moreover, this enforcement is highly classed and gendered. The man drinking whiskey in a private lounge is protected by economic legitimacy, while the *boda boda* rider drinking *Chang’aa* in an open-air den is marked as deviant, a body in need of regulation. As medical anthropologist Anne Lovell (2002) in her work *Risking Risk* argues, psychiatric governance extends beyond medical spaces; in this case, it manifests in selective police surveillance, criminalization of informal brewers, and the state’s arbitrary enforcement of alcohol laws. These interventions do not remove alcohol from circulation but instead reconfigure its accessibility, making drinking more dangerous for those without the privilege of regulated consumption spaces.

Yet at the same time, the body also emerges as a place of resistance. Mwakucha’s narrative, for example, shows that quitting alcohol is more than just an act of individual willpower; it is a process of retraining the body to reject what was once considered essential. His insistence on “degrading alcohol” in his mind echoes Bourdieu’s idea of habitus, where deeply ingrained habits and ways of thinking must be unlearned in order to effect lasting behavioural change (Bourdieu, 1977). In his journey toward sobriety, Mwakucha does not simply stop drinking but actively rewrites his bodily relationship with alcohol, reframing it as harmful, destructive, and no longer a part of his embodied reality.

However, while recovery is often framed as an act of personal discipline, this narrative of transformation still obscures the structural barriers that make sustained sobriety nearly impossible for many struggling with drinking. Without access to harm reduction programs, alternative economic opportunities, or rehabilitation centers, alcohol dependency persists, and it is not because of a moral failure but mainly as a systemic consequence of social neglect and economic precarity.

It is evident, therefore, that the state's approach to alcohol regulation remains punitive rather than rehabilitative. Despite the heavy-handed crackdowns on illicit brews, public health interventions remain insufficient. Prohibition laws, rather than addressing alcohol-related harm, further entrench cycles of criminalization, economic precarity, and social exclusion. Women brewers, in particular, find themselves caught between economic survival and state persecution, as explored in Chapter 6. Alcohol, therefore, cannot be understood outside of the power structures that regulate it. The criminalization of illicit alcohol is not just about controlling drinking; it is also as much about controlling who has the right to drink, under what conditions, and in what spaces. In other words, the policing of drinking bodies is deeply intrusive, a prohibitive mechanism of controlling the poor people in Taita-Taveta.

The Drinking Body in Spaces of Pain, Pleasure, and Power

Alcohol does not simply pass through the body; it inhabits, alters, and inscribes itself onto it, leaving traces in flesh and memory alike. From the moment ethanol enters the bloodstream, it initiates a sequence of biochemical, neurological, and social transformations—bringing pleasure, loss of control, bodily deterioration, and, ultimately, social rupture. This process is not just biomedical but also cultural and experiential. Alcohol is not just a chemical substance; it reshapes bodies in ways that are deeply tied to economic precarity, gender norms,

and public health policies. It burns the throat, numbs pain, slows movement, and alters cognition. Over time, its effects accumulate and become publicly visible through the shaking hands of withdrawal, the swollen stomachs of long-term drinkers, and the weight loss of those who drink but eat inconsistently.

The Sensory and Social Experience of Alcohol

The embodied experience of alcohol varies by alcohol type. A *Mnazi* seller in Voi, for instance, describes it as: “*Mnazi is smooth. It doesn’t fight your throat like spirits. You take it, and it goes down easily. And when it reaches your stomach, you feel warmth spreading in your body. It’s different from those other drinks that hit your head suddenly.*” By contrast, a local community leader describes *Chang’aa* as likely experienced: “*Changaa is like fire, and when a young person is drinking fire, it burns, and that is how they eventually catch TB.*”

These descriptions illustrate how alcohol is not just consumed but is also felt, experienced, and interpreted through social and bodily frameworks. *Mnazi*, white in colour when it is fresh, as depicted in Figure 39, is associated with warmth and social bonding, while *Chang’aa*, which is colourless and can easily be concealed and contributes to its fugitive quality, is linked to intensity and harm. These distinctions are not just about chemistry, they are also about how different forms of alcohol are socially categorized and policed.

From Intoxication to Bodily Breakdown

Initially, alcohol’s entry into the bloodstream brings euphoria, reduced inhibition, and social bonding, which are effects well-documented in both biomedical and socio-cultural research (Lath & Meshram, 2021; Ozburn et al., 2013). However, as alcohol concentration rises, the body and mind begin to lose coherence. A former social worker in Mwatate during an in-

depth described a man who had crossed this threshold: *“I saw the worst here in Mwatate just outside here; there was a man who had gone drinking somewhere up there; he drank in excess; he was a middle-aged man, and he came and slept by the roadside. He could not control himself, and he peed and defecated on himself.”*



Figure 39: A jug of freshly tapped Mnazi. Unlike Chang'aa and other spirits, Mnazi is described as a drink that 'warms the stomach' and fosters social bonding. Photo by Marura, August 2023.

This loss of bodily autonomy involving a state where muscular control, memory, and social decorum disintegrate is neither rare nor incidental. Similar cases have been recorded among *boda boda* riders and manual labourers, whose drinking contributes to high rates of alcohol-related injuries and even fatalities. A bar seller in Mwatate recounts:

Many youths who ride boda boda ... I have a friend who lost his fingers due to an accident while drunk. Some die, there are several who have died, young people my age because of alcoholism. Once you are drunk, you do not think straight. Some drink to the point of losing their memory. I have a friend who was a very good rider. He was coming from a bar in Voi at around 2 am, and he was with two friends on a motorbike. He was knocked over by a car at Caltex while heading to Mwatate. He found himself in the

hospital the following day; on asking him what happened, he only remembers leaving the bar; he does not remember riding.

These are not simply individual misfortunes but are also structural outcomes. Because the availability of cheap, unregulated alcohol accelerates risky behaviours, injuries, and fatalities (Room et al., 2005). Moreover, beyond physical harm, alcohol erodes cognitive control, exposing individuals to economic exploitation, sexual vulnerability, and violence. A local *Nyumba Kumi* leader notes: “*Most of these men and women do not practice safe sex. The moment they are drunk, they don’t remember to use protection. Some don’t even know who they slept with the night before.*” This is not just a question of personal irresponsibility; rather, it is as much about how alcohol, economic inequality, and gendered power structures intersect to produce complex fields of embodiments of vulnerability (Bourdieu, 1984; Hunt & Barker, 2001).

The Embodied Public Health Burden of Alcohol in Taita-Taveta

The stories of excessive drinking, liver disease, malnutrition, alcohol-related accidents, and domestic violence in Taita-Taveta are not isolated incidents. They reflect broader epidemiological patterns of premature mortality, social breakdown, and preventable health crises. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), alcohol contributes to approximately 3 million deaths annually, accounting for 5.3% of all global mortality. This burden is disproportionately carried by low- and middle-income countries, where unregulated alcohol markets and weak healthcare infrastructure amplify the risks (Ferreira-Borges et al., 2016). In fact, in Kenya, alcohol-related morbidity and mortality are significant public health concerns. The 2022 National Survey on the Status of Drugs and Substance Use reported that 3.2 million Kenyans aged 15–65 years are currently using alcohol, with over 500,000 classified as having Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD) (NACADA, 2022). This widespread consumption contributes to an

array of health conditions, including liver cirrhosis, cardiovascular diseases, and alcohol-induced injuries.

Taita-Taveta's Epidemiological Trends

Taita-Taveta exhibits these national patterns at a localized level, with alcohol dependency being one of the major drivers of social and health crises. The county has a long history of traditional brewing, widespread illicit alcohol consumption, and limited access to regulated liquor markets. The effects of alcohol misuse are evident in the high rates of liver cirrhosis, gastrointestinal diseases, and alcohol-related neurological disorders. Besides, the county records high alcohol-related injuries, particularly among boda-boda riders and manual labourers, and a rise in alcohol-fueled domestic violence cases and marital breakdowns (Mwashuma et al., 2024). Malnutrition, particularly in men who substitute alcohol for food, is also an issue, with Ferreira-Borges et al. (2016) reporting that alcohol consumption in sub-Saharan Africa is often embedded in social and economic structures that divert resources away from nutritional well-being. Yet, despite the high burden of alcohol-related illness and injury, healthcare services in Taita-Taveta remain underfunded and inaccessible to many affected individuals. This is due to a combination of structural neglect, economic constraints, and policy failures. The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME, 2021) reports that among the leading causes of death in the Taita-Taveta county include liver cirrhosis, chronic kidney disease, diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and alcohol-related neurological impairment. However, alcohol-related harm in Taita-Taveta is not evenly distributed across class lines. While wealthier drinkers have access to commercially regulated spirits and private drinking spaces, as seen in Figure 40, where commercially packaged

alcohol is even served in disposable tumblers, lower-income drinkers are disproportionately exposed to toxic, adulterated, and unregulated brews.

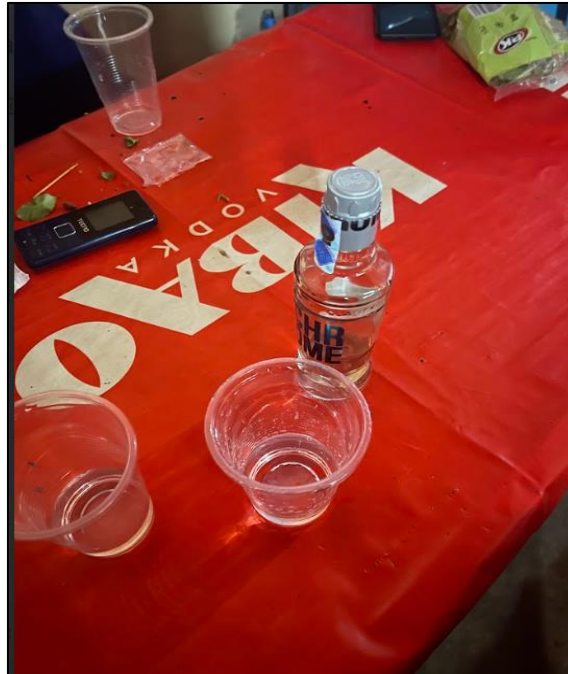


Figure 37: *A formal bar set up with a branded table cover and commercially packaged spirit served in disposable tumblers. Drinking spaces in formal establishments provide more regulated alcohol, emphasizing class disparities in access to 'safe' drinking environments. Photo by Marura, September, 2023.*

If anything, poverty levels are very high in Taita-Taveta, with overall headcount poverty and food poverty rates in 2022 estimated at 39.3% and 34.6%, respectively, against national rates of 39.8% and 31.7% in the same year (Commission on Revenue Allocation, 2022). Voi sub-county, which carries the highest urban population in the county, bears the brunt of poverty, standing at 44.1% against a range of between 21% and 38.5% in the other sub-counties (Commission on Revenue Allocation, 2022). This means that a larger proportion of the population is exposed to unregulated and potentially harmful alcohol compared to those who can afford safer, regulated liquor. Consequently, alcohol consumption patterns in Taita-Taveta are

shaped not just by individual choices but by deeply entrenched structural inequalities that determine who has access to safe drinking options and who is forced to consume riskier alternatives.

The epidemiological burden of alcohol in Taita-Taveta, like in many low-income contexts, is underestimated due to poor surveillance, underreporting, and the informal nature of alcohol economies (Room, 2005). Many alcohol-related deaths are not recorded as such; instead, they are likely to appear as motorbike accidents, high-cliff falls, or unexplained illnesses. A case from Moi County Hospital in Voi that I captured in a field note below illustrates this invisibility:

It is a Wednesday evening in July 2023. My cousin and I decide to visit the sick at Moi County Hospital in Voi as an act of mercy. We enter the male ward and speak with a few patients. One man stands out; he is a middle-aged man, possibly in his mid to late 40s. Let's call him Mwaviswa (not his real name). His younger brother, who has travelled from a neighboring location, is visiting him. Mwaviswa is being treated for a broken leg. When I ask if he was involved in a motorbike accident, he casually says he fell from a cliff but cannot explain how it happened. Just as we are about to leave, Mwaviswa's brother asks us to find out why he, as a brother, is the one visiting instead of the patient's immediate family. Laughing, he reveals that Mwaviswa does not have a family of his own. We joke with him, encouraging him to recover so he can start thinking about marriage. However, though it is never explicitly mentioned, the brother hints that alcohol played a role and that it is likely Mwaviswa fell and broke his leg while drunk, which would explain his inability to recall the incident clearly. Stories about men in Taita with alcohol problems not marrying or having families of their own are familiar. It appears that Mwaviswa's brother may have been indirectly urging him to stop drinking and settle down by subtly revealing other aspects of his social life. There is a societal expectation that a wife should take care of her sick husband when he is in the hospital, not other men, who are ideally expected to be working. If anything, chances are that in the medical records, this case is recorded as a fall injury, missing out on the structural reality that alcohol is likely the cause. [Wednesday, July 26, 2023]

Mwaviswa here would be treated for a broken leg, but alcohol as a risk factor will go unrecorded. This case represents a larger epidemiological pattern where alcohol-related harm in Taita-Taveta is often invisible within official statistics, allowing the crisis to persist without adequate intervention. Nevertheless, Taita-Taveta stands out in Kenya's coastal region for its high levels of alcohol dependency and illicit alcohol consumption. According to NACADA's

2016 baseline survey *Alcohol and Drug Abuse in the Coast Region*, traditional liquor is the most commonly used type of alcohol (8.2%), followed by packaged/legal alcohol (6.7%), *Chang'aa* (2.3%), and second-generation alcohol (1.3%) (NACADA, 2016). Notably, Taita-Taveta recorded the highest usage of second-generation alcohol compared to the other coastal counties, with 5.8% of its residents classified as alcohol dependent. This pattern of consumption suggests that alcohol plays an outsized role in the county's social and economic dysfunctions.

The Public Health Consequences of Ineffective Alcohol Policy

While other regions have successfully reduced alcohol-related harm through structured intervention programs, Taita-Taveta remains locked in a punitive cycle that deepens dependency rather than alleviating it. Globally, harm reduction strategies, such as medically supervised withdrawal, controlled alcohol management programs, and psychosocial support services, have been shown to reduce alcohol-related mortality and long-term dependency (WHO, 2018). However, within the context of Taita-Taveta, policing functions as the default intervention, reinforcing a cycle of criminalization and relapse. Women brewers, as explored in Chapter 6, find themselves targeted by law enforcement without viable alternative livelihoods, forcing them back into illicit brewing under more precarious conditions.

Despite the global evidence supporting harm reduction strategies, Taita-Taveta's approach has remained heavily reliant on punitive measures, as seen in the implementation of national and county-level alcohol control policies. The Kenyan government, both at the national and county levels, has introduced various policies aimed at controlling alcohol consumption, particularly illicit brews. These policies, including Kenya's Alcoholic Drinks Control Act (2010) and the Taita-Taveta County Alcoholic Drinks Control and Licensing Act (2016), were introduced as public health measures to curb alcohol-related harm. They sought to regulate the production,

sale, and consumption of alcohol; restrict drinking hours; prohibit the sale of unlicensed alcoholic beverages; and introduce rehabilitation programs for alcohol-dependent individuals. However, these laws have failed to address the root causes of alcohol dependency.

The implementation of these laws has, however, not been without challenges. Despite their well-intentioned nature, enforcement has been highly inconsistent, selective, and corrupt. While the Mututho Law and county regulations are supposed to control alcohol sales, their enforcement is often shaped by opportunism rather than public health concerns, with law enforcement officials using alcohol raids to extract bribes from brewers and bar owners. A local county official describes the unequal enforcement:

It has become excessive because you find that people start drinking in the morning, the second thing is there has been betrayal, because those whom we are supposed to monitor have become; and especially our colleagues from the national government, have turned it into a place to get some money especially if their salaries are late and they need to accomplish their duties. This is something being done in the open. For those brewing local brews and those who smoke marijuana, have designated dates to hand money to chiefs and assistant chiefs and the police in that area. So they know the designated dates and you will see them taking the money there.

As a result, these laws have not reduced alcohol consumption, nor have they improved public health outcomes. Instead, they have led to corrupt and selective enforcement, where officials take bribes from illicit brewers rather than ensuring their safety. This has disproportionately affected women brewers, who, as discussed earlier, are often targeted by law enforcement without access to alternative livelihoods. Furthermore, the lack of harm reduction programs has left drinkers with no medical or psychological support, exacerbating the cycle of dependency and criminalization.

A 52-year-old male county official openly admits:

Our colleagues from the national government have turned alcohol enforcement into a money-making scheme. Those brewing local brews and those selling illicit alcohol have

designated days to hand money to chiefs, assistant chiefs, and the police. So, when raids happen, they're just a performance.

This cycle of corruption and criminalization does not stop drinking. Instead, it makes it more precarious. Rather than treating alcohol dependency as a public health issue, enforcement measures have instead criminalized the most vulnerable drinkers and brewers. As one village elder explains: *“Instead of finding solutions for brewers, the state raids them, confiscates their equipment, and forces them into deeper poverty. This makes alcohol production more secretive and dangerous.”*

The illicit alcohol economy remains deeply entrenched, and despite frequent police crackdowns, demand has not diminished. Instead, brewers have adapted by producing even more toxic brews to evade authorities, while female brewers face increased risks as they operate under police surveillance and navigate threats of gender-based violence. With no viable economic alternatives, many brewers have no choice but to return to illicit production, perpetuating the cycle of criminalization and economic instability.

This punitive approach aligns with global research, which shows that prohibitionist alcohol policies do not eliminate drinking but instead push it further underground, often increasing the risks associated with unregulated alcohol consumption (Room, 2005; Willis, 2006). The failure of enforcement in Taita-Taveta, therefore, is not just about ineffective policy but about how state structures perpetuate economic precarity, corruption, and public health risks.

Shifting Alcohol Policy Toward Harm Reduction and Structural Change

Addressing alcohol dependency requires a fundamental shift from viewing it as a moral failing to recognizing it as an outcome of complex interactions within a network of human and non-human actors that range from regulatory systems, economic structures, and social norms to

the materiality of alcohol itself. Structural interventions must therefore account for these entangled relations, acknowledging how diverse actants, including policies, environments, and cultural discourses, collectively shape drinking practices and dependencies. Current policies prioritize punitive crackdowns over harm reduction, rehabilitation, and economic alternatives, ultimately exacerbating the problem rather than addressing its root causes. A more effective approach would invest in harm reduction programs, including supervised withdrawal clinics and community-based recovery spaces, ensuring that those struggling with dependency receive the necessary medical and psychological support. Instead of criminalizing women brewers, policies should create regulated cooperatives that provide them with legal economic opportunities while improving the safety and quality of alcohol production. Additionally, expanding public health infrastructure to integrate alcohol dependency treatment with mental health and addiction services within local healthcare systems would offer a more sustainable and compassionate response. Addressing alcohol dependency through these measures would move beyond punitive enforcement and toward meaningful inclusive change.

As long as alcohol policy remains trapped in moral and prohibitionist frameworks, drinking will continue to function both as a survival strategy and a tool of state control. People do not drink simply because they lack discipline; they drink because alcohol is deeply embedded in the economies of precarity, the endurance of suffering, and the politics of care (Bourgois, 2003; Garcia, 2010). The real crisis in this context, therefore, is not alcohol itself but more in the economic and structural conditions that make its most dangerous forms the only viable option. Until harm reduction, economic stability, and social care become central to alcohol policy, the cycle of dependency, criminalization, and state neglect will persist and, unfortunately, at a significant human cost.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

John Law, in his work *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, emphasizes that realities are actively created through everyday practices rather than simply existing independently. This indicates that realities are multiple, precarious, and contested, always influenced by political dynamics that reflect disparities in power, resource allocation, and possibilities for action (Law, 2004).

As illustrated throughout this dissertation, my research aligns with this perspective, investigating the multiple and intertwined realities of problematic drinking among young people in Taita-Taveta, Kenya. Using the analytical lenses of material semiotics complemented by political economy, I traced the interconnections between alcohol, space, sociality, governance, and structural inequalities. This approach demonstrates that drinking practices transcend individual moral failings or public health concerns, becoming deeply embedded within broader social, economic, and political contexts. In this concluding chapter, I summarize key arguments discussed throughout the dissertation, emphasizing material semiotics' value in understanding how heavy drinking is socially and materially constituted. I further offer policy and practice recommendations emerging directly from my analysis, reflecting solutions proposed by participants, ensuring practical relevance and effectiveness.

Situating Alcohol as a Socio-Material Actant

This dissertation challenges dominant biomedical perspectives that frame alcohol as a passive substance and instead highlights its role as a socio-material actant in young people's drinking practices in Taita-Taveta. Conventional public health research often presents alcohol as

an inert chemical that produces predictable physiological effects when consumed excessively (Obot, 2007; Room, 2010). Public health discourse further pathologizes certain drinking behaviours by positioning alcohol as a substance that causes harm through addiction, toxicity, and its association with risky behaviours such as unsafe sex, violence, and road accidents (Rehm et al., 2017; Shield et al., 2014; Tumwesigye, Atuyambe, et al., 2012). This study demonstrates that such an approach fails to capture young people's lived experiences with alcohol and the reasons why it remains central to their social and economic lives despite public health interventions.

By drawing on material semiotics, particularly ANT, I reconceptualize alcohol not as an inert substance but as an active participant in social life. Alcohol functions as a co-constitutive actant that interacts with people, spaces, governance structures, and economic systems to produce specific realities. As Latour (1996) argues, objects and materials are not simply shaped by human actions; they possess agency-like capacities to transform social interactions, mediate relationships, and structure human behaviours. Through ethnographic analysis, this dissertation research has traced how different types of alcohol, including their types, modes of consumption, and economic circulations, become entangled with young drinkers' material and symbolic worlds, reshaping their social lives, economic engagements, and moral subjectivities. Chapter Three, for example, examined how different types of alcohol such as *Mnazi*, *Cha'aa*, and *Pasha* serve as more than just intoxicating substances but also carry cultural, economic, and moral weight, acting as material markers of class distinctions, gender performances, and local moral economies of drinking. We saw *Mnazi*, which is a palm wine largely available in the coastal region, it is often framed as a drink of social connectedness, community integration, and "cultural authenticity." As such, it is consumed in communal settings, where young men will

likely learn the norms of masculinity, financial exchange, and peer solidarity. *Cha'aa* and *Pasha*, on the other hand, which are highly potent and potentially chemically altered local brews, are associated with rapid intoxication, regulatory evasion, and the precarity of illicit alcohol markets. Their consumption often signals economic hardship, as they are primarily sought by those who cannot afford pricier commercial drinks. Therefore, we see that here, alcohol acts as a medium through which young people navigate their economic standing and construct moral distinctions between “respectable” and “reckless” drinking. Moreover, as the dissertation has shown, alcohol’s materiality, be it its form, strength, and means of distribution, greatly shapes the social relations around it. Because something like the availability of potent, illicit alcohol, for example, has the potential to alter the tempo and nature of intoxication. While *Mnazi* drinking unfolds over extended periods of social interaction, the consumption of illicit spirits like *Pasha* is often compressed into brief, intense encounters, sometimes in precarious or clandestine spaces. These contrasting material-semiotic configurations of alcohol reveal how its physical properties—combined with broader regulatory and economic forces—actively shape young people’s drinking geographies and temporalities.

Drinking Geographies and Spatial Politics

For research of my nature that is seeking to examine problem drinking more holistically, it requires also a critical examination of the spatial politics of alcohol consumption, and from what we have seen this reveal how drinking practices are not only shaped by personal choices or cultural traditions but how they are also contextually interwoven in spatial configurations of power, governance, and economic survival. In Chapter Four I have shown that the geographies of drinking in Taita-Taveta are neither random nor neutral but also reflect historical inequalities, economic dispossession, and shifting governance strategies. Based on findings from the field, I

have demonstrated how both formal and informal drinking spaces are sites of struggle where state actors, drinkers, and alcohol vendors negotiate authority, legality, and economic survival.

Existing literature shows that alcohol consumption in many parts of the world is spatially territorialized by class, race, and regulatory power (Jayne et al., 2008). Scholars have demonstrated how drinking venues, such as the bars, nightclubs, or informal dens, operate as arenas of social control and economic governance, where regulations and social norms are enforced, contested, or circumvented (Room, 2010; Valverde, 1998). In the case of Kenya, the formal drinking economy is structured around state-licensed establishments, primarily targeting middle-class and elite consumers who can afford commercially regulated alcohol. However, for economically marginalized populations, including the young men and women in this study, access to alcohol is mediated through a parallel, often illicit, drinking economy that operates outside the boundaries of legal oversight. This discourse points to what my dissertation research reveals: that the proliferation of illicit drinking spaces in economically marginalized areas of Taita-Taveta is not simply a consequence of individual choices but a structural response to governance dynamics and complexities. The findings of this study highlight that state-imposed alcohol restrictions such as taxation, licensing requirements, and prohibitions on unregulated brews, do not necessarily reduce drinking but instead likely to drive it into hidden, precarious spaces. These spaces, as examined in Chapter Four, range from makeshift drinking dens in especially low-income settlements to mobile drinking operations that shift locations to evade law enforcement.

This pattern, however, is not unique to Kenya. Scholars examining liquor bans and restrictive alcohol policies in the Global South have argued that prohibitionist governance often exacerbates rather than curbs illicit alcohol economies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2019; Willis,

2002). In South Africa, for instance, colonial and apartheid-era restrictions on alcohol access for Black South Africans led to the growth of *shebeens*, which are unregulated drinking spaces that persist today as critical economic and social hubs (Mager, 2010). Similarly, in Latin America, state crackdowns on informal alcohol economies have often intensified the circulation of highly potent and hazardous illicit brews, as seen with *chicha* in Bolivia and *aguardiente* in Colombia (Arévalo Velásquez et al., 2023; Heath, 2000). The case of Taita-Taveta then mirrors these global trends whereby restrictive alcohol regulations do not eliminate illicit drinking but instead reshape its geographies, forcing it into precarious, hidden, and often more dangerous spaces. If anything, as this dissertation expands, digital infrastructures, particularly mobile money and social media, have all come in and now play a significant role in reshaping alcohol access, distribution, and consumption. Chapter Four demonstrates how young people use mobile payment platforms like M-Pesa to buy alcohol remotely, bypassing traditional vendor-client interactions. Of which we can argue that to a certain extent, this financial technology, which enables drinkers to order and pay for alcohol in advance, reduces also their exposure to state surveillance and social scrutiny. Such findings align with broader anthropological scholarship on the role of digital finance in reshaping economic and social life in Africa. For instance, Sholar Kevin Donovan (2012), in *Mobile Money for Financial Inclusion*, examines the impact of mobile money services in developing countries. He explains how these services provide accessible financial options and, in turn, transform economic interactions and social realities. Similarly, in his work *How Would You Like to Pay*, cultural anthropologist Bill Maurer (2015) explores how payment technologies reshape everyday transactions, providing a framework for understanding the broader implications of integrating mobile payments into social realities, such as alcohol consumption.

Moreover, social media platforms—including WhatsApp and Facebook—mediate drinking cultures by serving as spaces where young people organize drinking events, circulate information about alcohol availability, and construct drinking norms. This study found that drinking-related social media groups are likely to function as peer-driven information hubs, allowing users even to share updates about police crackdowns, alternative drinking venues, or even *motivate* each other into drinking excessively. These findings extend existing literature on the intersection of digital media and nightlife economies, where scholars have examined how online platforms influence drinking behaviours in Western club cultures (Nofre et al., 2017). In Taita-Taveta, however, the role of digital infrastructures is not merely about curating drinking experiences; it is also about evading surveillance, coordinating economic exchanges, and ensuring the continuity of illicit alcohol economies.

Alcohol and Social Reproduction

In this dissertation I also examine the role of alcohol in social reproduction, particularly its entanglement with kinship structures, economic dependencies, and gendered labor relations. While public health discourses often conceptualize alcohol as a disruptor of family life by framing excessive drinking as a driver of domestic instability, economic decline, and intergenerational harm, this study reveals a more complex reality. Chapter Five demonstrates that alcohol is both a means of survival and a site of social negotiation, where drinking practices facilitate and complicate economic and relational interdependencies. Specifically, for young men in Taita-Taveta, alcohol consumption functions as a critical site for the performance of masculinity, peer bonding, and economic reciprocity. Scholars of alcohol and masculinity have long observed that men's drinking practices are often deeply embedded in gendered norms of sociability, endurance, and economic exchange (de Visser & Smith, 2007; Thurnell-Read, 2015).

This study therefore corroborates these findings, showing how young men engage in collective drinking rituals to assert their status within male peer networks. At the same time, drinking spaces function as informal economic hubs, where men negotiate work opportunities, debts, and financial assistance. I highlight how in the field I observed young men often relying on drinking networks for economic support, whether through borrowing money from drinking peers or securing casual labor opportunities through barroom conversations. In this way, alcohol becomes an economic medium, not merely a recreational substance.

In contrast, however, women who drink face intense social surveillance and moral scrutiny, reflecting entrenched gender norms that position female drinking as deviant, irresponsible, or sexually transgressive. Of which this gendered double standard is consistent with broader anthropological research on alcohol and gender, where scholars have shown how women's drinking is often framed as a sign of moral and social disorder (Emslie et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2010). However, this dissertation research has also found that some women strategically appropriate drinking spaces as sites of resistance and economic agency. In particular, women involved in illicit alcohol production and trade such as *Pasha* brewers, navigate a complex moral economy in which their role as alcohol providers is both economically necessary and socially contested. As Willis (2002) has shown in his research on women alcohol traders in Kenya, female brewers operate within contradictory moral frameworks, simultaneously stigmatized as corrupters of youth and relied upon as economic providers. This study builds on such scholarship by demonstrating how women in Taita-Taveta negotiate these tensions, balancing their roles as economic actors in the alcohol trade while mitigating the social risks associated with female drinking.

The Structural and Embodied Production of Problematic Drinking

Scholars of political economy and alcohol governance have long argued that the regulation of alcohol is inseparable from statecraft, economic restructuring, and market logics (Room, 2010; Valverde, 1998). In Kenya, as in many postcolonial settings, alcohol governance is a continuation of colonial control mechanisms that sought to suppress indigenous alcohol production while privileging imported and state-sanctioned beverages (Ambler, 1990; Willis, 2002). Chapter Six traced the historical evolution of alcohol regulation in Kenya, demonstrating how colonial authorities criminalized local brewing practices—not because of concerns over public health, but to protect the economic interests of European alcohol manufacturers. The legacy of these colonial prohibitions persists today, as state actors continue to vilify and police informal alcohol markets while simultaneously profiting from the taxation of commercial alcohol industries. This dynamic is not unique to Kenya. Similar patterns emerge across the Global South, where the governance of alcohol has been instrumentalized as a means of economic regulation, social control, and political legitimation. In India, alcohol prohibition policies in certain states have paradoxically expanded illicit liquor economies, leading to more toxic and dangerous brews rather than reducing alcohol consumption (Schess et al., 2023). These cases illustrate a key argument of this dissertation: illicit alcohol is not an anomaly—it is a structured response to state economic policies and governance failures. And what this introduces is what I refer to as liquid fugitivity which in this context is a concept that describe how young drinkers, illicit alcohol producers, and informal distributors navigate state surveillance and regulatory evasion. It is a concept that builds on scholarship on everyday resistance and informal economies, particularly work that examines how marginalized communities strategically evade state control in order to sustain their livelihoods (Roitman, 2005; Scott, 1985). In the field found that illicit alcohol distributors and young drinkers deploy various tactical maneuvers to

circumvent alcohol restrictions such as establishing Mobile distribution networks, where vendors transport illicit brews via motorbikes and tuk-tuks to avoid detection, Bribery and collusion with law enforcement, where informal alcohol operators negotiate their continued operations through small-scale payments to local officials, Strategic use of digital communication to coordinate alcohol sales and evade police crackdowns, and Shifting drinking geographies, where young people move between different drinking sites—abandoned buildings, informal homesteads, and transient dens—depending on the intensity of state surveillance. These strategies reveal that illicit drinking economies are not merely chaotic or disorganized but are deeply rational and adaptive. This complicates public health models that assume strict enforcement of alcohol bans will automatically lead to reduced consumption. Instead, the study shows that prohibitionist policies frequently drive alcohol consumption underground, making it more precarious, more toxic, and less governable (Willis, 2006).

Beyond prohibition, my research findings further challenge dominant policy paradigms that assume illicit alcohol consumption can be addressed through increased enforcement, harsher penalties, or moral campaigns. I advance the knowledge that informal alcohol markets persist not because of weak regulation but because of structural economic inequalities. Because as we see in Chapter Six, many young drinkers in Taita-Taveta resort to consuming illicit alcohol not out of preference but out of economic necessity. Licensed commercial alcohol is prohibitively expensive for many young people, especially given high levels of youth unemployment, income insecurity, and limited alternative leisure activities. This is consistent with research from other parts of Africa, where illicit alcohol thrives in contexts of economic marginalization (Dumbili, 2015; Tumwesigye et al., 2012). Studies in Nigeria, for example, have shown that young men in urban slums consume unregulated spirits not because they prefer them but because they are the

only affordable option (Dumbili, 2015). In Uganda, the criminalization of waragi (local gin) has not reduced consumption but has pushed production into more clandestine and unsafe environments, increasing the risks of methanol poisoning and other health hazards (Doreen et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Undoubtedly, my dissertation research findings emphasize the urgent need for a paradigmatic shift in alcohol policy and practice to move away from punitive, prohibitionist approaches and toward structural, harm-reduction, and community-led strategies. Existing public health and governance frameworks often fail because they treat alcohol consumption as an individualized problem rather than recognizing it as a materially and socially entangled reality within broader actor networks comprising economic conditions, social relationships, governance structures and other human and non-human entities such as alcohol itself, licensing systems, and physical drinking spaces. From an actor-network perspective, alcohol consumption in Taita-Taveta emerges not merely from individual choices but from a complex web of human and non-human actants that co-construct drinking practices. These include local economic precarity, peer networks, regulatory frameworks, traditional brews, and even the infrastructures of drinking spaces. Recognizing these heterogeneous associations challenges reductionist views and demands interventions that reshape these networks rather than just penalize their outcomes. Drawing on the insights from the study's empirical findings and participants' own suggestions, I list below key policy and practice recommendations that potentially can reconfigure these socio-material networks and address the social, economic, and political realities that co-produce problem drinking in Taita-Taveta and beyond.

1. Reorienting Alcohol Policy Towards Structural Interventions

Scholars have demonstrated that blanket bans on illicit alcohol not only fail to curb consumption but also exacerbate public health risks by pushing drinking into unregulated and often hazardous spaces (Willis, 2006). The prohibitionist frameworks, informal alcohol economies, and illicit brews (such as *Pasha* and *Chang'aa*) together make entangled actants within the alcohol network, and their interactions produce unintended consequences, such as hazardous drinking environments. In Kenya, restrictive licensing policies have led to the proliferation of informal alcohol markets, reinforcing inequalities between those who can afford commercial alcohol and those who rely on cheaper, unregulated alternatives (Willis, 2002). Therefore, one of the most effective structural interventions would be to legalize and regulate traditional brews such as *Mbangara*, as they have done for *Mnazi*. This does not simply change a law but reconfigures the network by ensuring the regulatory bodies, alcohol producers, cultural norms, and consumers come together into a new assemblage of human and non-human actors, thereby stabilizing safer production practices. The approach can focus on introducing quality control measures and licensing systems that ensure public health safety without erasing these brews' cultural and economic value. By formalizing the production of traditional brews, local governments could increase tax revenue, improve public health outcomes, and support economic livelihoods without forcing alcohol consumption into the shadows.

2. Community-Based Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategies

Harm reduction approaches recognize that alcohol consumption cannot be eradicated but can be managed in ways that minimize harm (Rhodes, 2009). In contrast to punitive enforcement approaches, which often target drinkers through police crackdowns and incarceration, harm reduction strategies emphasize peer support, safe drinking spaces, and community-driven

interventions (Hunt & Barker, 2001). Peer networks are not just social actors but crucial nodes in the broader alcohol consumption network. Informal spaces, peer relationships, and drinking practices co-constitute drinking realities. And since this study found that young drinkers rely heavily on peer networks to navigate drinking spaces and practices, these networks could be mobilized as harm reduction agents, facilitating peer-led education programs that promote safer drinking habits, offer information on alcohol toxicity, and provide mental health support. The success of peer-driven harm reduction models in HIV prevention (Campbell & Cornish, 2010) suggests that similar approaches could be adapted for alcohol-related interventions. Moreover, because of the precarious conditions of illicit drinking spaces, where lack of regulation increases exposure to violence, toxic brews, and health risks, establishing safe drinking spaces where alcohol can be consumed under regulated conditions could reduce these harms. In some settings, wet houses—supervised drinking environments that provide healthcare access and social support—have shown success in reducing alcohol-related harm without requiring abstinence (Collins et al., 2012). While such models may not be directly replicable in the Kenyan context, they offer insights into the importance of mediators that transform the dynamics of problem drinking, producing safer drinking outcomes.

3. Strengthening Local Economic Opportunities

Economic precarity is a central actant that sustains problematic drinking, as this dissertation research has shown. Alcohol economies, informal employment structures, and youth unemployment are interlinked in the network. As such, rather than focusing solely on demand-side alcohol interventions, policymakers must address the economic conditions that sustain excessive drinking. Investments in vocational training programs, youth employment initiatives, and alternative economic opportunities are essential in reconfiguring the economic networks and

weakening the activities that sustain reliance on alcohol economies. Governments should stop treating alcohol regulation and economic development as separate policy domains, but as interconnected within a network. Alcohol regulation policies should be designed in tandem with employment initiatives, as this is a move towards recognizing that economic structures and regulatory frameworks are co-constitutive, and any intervention must act on multiple realities simultaneously.

4. Gender-Sensitive Interventions

Alcohol consumption is not a gender-neutral practice; rather, it is shaped by entrenched gender norms that dictate who can drink, where they can drink, and how their drinking is morally judged. Meaning the social expectations about masculinity and femininity are powerful, non-human actants that shape drinking behaviour. This study found that women who drink face heightened social scrutiny, while men are often pressured to drink as a marker of masculinity. Therefore, addressing the masculinized pressures of heavy drinking is crucial. Public health campaigns must engage men in conversations about gender, social expectations, and alcohol-related risk-taking, shifting the discourse from “responsible drinking” to critically examining the social pressures that normalize excessive alcohol use among men.

5. Enhancing Mental Health and Rehabilitation Services

One of the study’s most pressing findings is the lack of accessible, affordable rehabilitation services in Taita-Taveta, even though mental health services, treatment infrastructures and support networks are part of an interconnected health governance network. As with other regions in sub-Saharan Africa, mental health services remain underfunded, overstretched, and inaccessible to most people struggling with alcohol dependency (Petersen et

al., 2016). Thus, rather than treating alcohol recovery as a separate medical intervention, I recommend the integration of substance use treatment into broader public health systems to expand the network, and enroll new actants like community health works, peer recovery groups and mobile clinics. Expanding how the lack of accessible services is addressed will be appropriate and can provide low-barrier pathways to care for people experiencing alcohol dependency.

6. Reforming Alcohol Licensing and Regulatory Frameworks

Corruption, regulatory loopholes, and uneven enforcement are powerful actants that shape the current governance network around alcohol in Kenya. This study found that alcohol licensing often favours powerful commercial interests while criminalizing small-scale alcohol vendors. It will be beneficial, therefore, if regulatory bodies operate with greater accountability, ensuring that licensing processes are not subject to political interference or bribery. Strategies such as publicly available licensing data, independent monitoring agencies, and leveraging on existing community oversight committees could displace corrupt actants and stabilize the network around more accountable and equitable governance practices. Besides, instead of imposing blanket restrictions on alcohol sales, policymakers should design licensing frameworks that consider the socio-economic realities. Regulations should ensure that affordable, safe alcohol is available to consumers, while also minimizing the risks associated with unregulated alcohol markets.

Concluding Remarks

To reiterate, this dissertation is an attempt to reconceptualize problem drinking among young people, challenging the dominant reductionist narratives that frame it as an individualized

pathology or simply a public health risk. By exposing the entanglements of alcohol with sociality, governance, and structural inequalities, I advance a more expansive analytical framework; one that insists on seeing problem drinking as a historically, politically, economically, and materially embedded practice. In doing so, it pushes beyond prevailing public health ways of thinking, urging scholars and policymakers alike to rethink alcohol consumption not as a problem to be eradicated but as a phenomenon and a reality reflecting deeper socio-economic and political conditions. This study's intervention is thus both theoretical and practical: it not only expands the conceptual boundaries of alcohol research but also offers a roadmap for more just and contextually grounded interventions. Moving beyond punitive and criminalizing logics, it calls for re-structuring and aligning diverse actants through processes such as structural reform, harm reduction, and community-driven approaches that recognize and respond to the lived realities of young people. Only by addressing the fundamental economic, social, and political forces that shape alcohol consumption can policymakers respond to entangled realities of problem drinking and design interventions that are not only effective but also inclusive and transformative.

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GOVERNMENT POLICIES

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Sample Research Assistants Confidentiality Agreement



Data Confidentiality Agreement for Study Staff

Definition of Terms

Study Staff	Individuals to whom the Principal Investigator has assigned study specific roles and responsibilities, and includes but is not limited, to investigators, research coordinators, managers, research officers, statisticians, laboratory staff, nurses, doctors and research assistants. These individuals either interact with study participants through interviews or other interventions, or have access to identifiable private information about the study participants for purposes of the research.
Lead Institution	Institution to which the Principal Investigator is affiliated and which is the lead institution for the research being conducted.
Collaborating Institutions	Two or more organisations working with the lead institution to implement research activities (conceptualisation of the research idea, proposal development, data collection, analysis, validation, report writing and dissemination) with the aim of achieving the set research objectives.
Confidential Information	Refers to all research participant and institutional (lead and collaborating institutions) business, financial, personal, personnel, student and operational information and material, written or oral, that is not in the public domain, and which is public domain, and which is designated as confidential, that is disclosed or made available to the receiving party, directly or indirectly, through any means of communication or observation.



This Data Confidentiality Agreement (the "Agreement") for study staff with respect to the study entitled:

The Material Semiotics of "Heavy Drinking" among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination.

conducted by The University of Manitoba
[Lead and Collaborating Institution(s)]

is made

BETWEEN:

Name of study staff: Justina Marura Ngoda

Ad
ma

AND:

Name of Principal Investigator: Bernadette Kina Kombo

or authorized representative

A
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Email

The lead and collaborating institution(s) in the study (s) possess valuable confidential information (as herein defined) regarding tools and materials appertaining to its research and development information and that of its participants. In consideration of the necessary disclosure of study participants' confidential information during the period of engagement in the study, the undersigned study staff hereby covenants and agrees as follows:

1. Confidentiality

The study staff acknowledges that in the course of engagement in this study, he/she will be exposed to study participants' confidential information. The study staff therefore agrees to treat all such information as confidential and to take all necessary precautions against disclosure of such information to third parties during and after the term of this agreement. The study staff acknowledges that study participants' confidential information will consist of, but not necessarily limited to participant personal identifiers and the company/organisation's tools and research materials relating to the study participants. The study staff understands that this agreement does not and will not prevent him/her from working for any other company/organisation(s) subsequent to the termination of this



engagement as long as the study staff does not make use of or disclose any such confidential and proprietary information.

"Confidential Information" shall mean any non-public business, financial, personal, personnel, student or operational information that the lead and collaborating institution(s) specifically mark and designate, in writing, as confidential. Should confidential information be given orally, it needs to be consigned to written form and marked confidential by the discloser of the confidential information and shared with the other party within seven (7) days. "Confidential Information" in this context includes but is not limited to, descriptive material, server (access codes) containing the participants' study information, organisation(s)/company's information obligated to be treated as confidential and any other materials and information of a confidential nature.

"Confidential Materials" shall mean all tangible materials containing confidential information, including without limitation, statements, data collection sheets, tapes, and compact disks (CD), whether machine or user readable, and all storage containing the study information.

2. Data storage, sharing and security

The data from the study will be stored in a secure server where only authorised individuals will have access to the data. This data will be backed up on a secure server with access granted only by the investigators in each institution. All parties will implement and maintain appropriate technical and organisational measures to safeguard the data against unlawful and unauthorized processing and against accidental loss, destruction of and/or damage to the data. In particular, all parties will:

- Keep the data strictly private and confidential including encryption, pseudonymization or anonymization of personal data where appropriate;
- Prevent absolutely any unauthorized disclosures of personal data and minimize any authorized disclosure of personal data to third parties to the fullest extent possible. This includes not sending or receiving the data through non-secure means such as email, social media and any other such media.
- Allow access to the data through access controls to ensure this requirement is satisfied. This means that anyone who would like to use the data, including students, will only be allowed to do so after being granted permission from the principal investigator and after signing a data sharing agreement.
- Ensure that any recipients of the data are subject to a binding duty of confidentiality in relation to the data. This means that anyone who is granted access to the data is not allowed to share, without prior written agreement from the Principal Investigator.
- The parties will retain the data for five years after study completion. However, neither party will destroy information without first informing the other parties.



- All parties will take reasonable steps to ensure the reliability of all (whether study staff, volunteers, students, contractors or otherwise) who may have access to the personal data, and to ensure that they are adequately trained in the good handling of the data and are subject to a duty of confidentiality.
- Study Staff shall return all originals, copies and any study material of confidential information and/or confidential materials at the Principal Investigator's request.

3. Data processing and record keeping

All parties will process data only in accordance with standard procedures and established practice; and will not use the data for any purpose other than those set out in this agreement. All parties will maintain a record of the processing activities which relate to this Agreement in accordance with the requirements of the study country's Protection Regulations as stipulated in Clause 7 of this agreement.

4. Enforcement

The study staff acknowledges and agrees that any breach of this Agreement may cause irreparable injury to the study participants and the organisations involved. The study staff therefore agrees that if he/she commits a breach of any of the provisions of this Agreement, the lead institution shall have the right to enforce this Agreement in any court of law having equity jurisdiction. However, this will be preceded by a discussion between investigators from the lead and collaborating institution(s) and the responsible study staff, and if no understanding or agreement is reached then arbitration which is more expedient, beneficial, and the least costly avenue will be entered into.

5. Termination

All materials furnished to study staff by the involved organisations during this study, and all materials prepared by the study staff in connection with employee's engagement in this study including without limitation documents, source codes, along with all copies made thereof, shall be returned promptly to the responsible organisation upon termination of the study staff's engagement in the study. This Agreement commences when it is signed and dated by all parties and will continue unless terminated early for a period of one (1) year. The agreement will be renewed annually as required to ensure compliance with relevant legislation and best practice.

6. Ownership

The study staff agrees that all developments made and works created by study staff or under study staff's direction in connection with the study shall be the sole and complete property of the responsible organisation(s), that any and all copyrights and other proprietary interests therein shall belong to the responsible organisations, and that the other provisions of this Agreement shall fully apply to all such developments and works.



7. Governing Law

This agreement shall be construed in accordance with the data protection act: Kenya Law (Act No. 24 of 2019). The agreement is also intended to ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998, the General Data Protection Regulation, and the Data Protection Act 2018 by all parties.

8. Indemnification

The parties to this agreement are responsible for their own negligent acts and omissions.

Binding Agreement

If any parts of these promises are void for any reason, the undersigned accepts that it may be severed without affecting the validity or enforceability of the balance of the promises. This agreement constitutes the entire agreement between/among the parties with respect to the subject matter hereof. It shall not be modified except by a written agreement dated subsequent to the date of this agreement and signed by both parties.

This Agreement shall be binding upon and inure to the benefit of the parties, their successors, assigns and personal representatives.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, each party to this Agreement has caused it to be executed at
.....Voi, Kenya.....on the date 01 August 2023.....

Name of Principal Investigator

Study Staff

or authorised representative

Authorised signature

Bernadette Kina Kombo

Print Name

PhD Student

Print Title

Authorised signature

Justina Marura Ngoda

Print Name

Research Assistant

Print Title

Appendix 2: Young People Interview Guide

Interview/Group Discussion Guiding Questions

Title of Study: “The Material Semiotics of “Heavy Drinking” among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination”.

Principal Investigator: Bernadette Kina Kombo,
University of Manitoba,


Advisor: Dr Robert Lorway

Participants: Young People (18 -35+ years)

QUESTIONS

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, such as your age, occupation, and educational background?
2. At what point did you start drinking and how has been the experience with using alcohol?
3. Can you describe what drinking means to you and why you choose to drink?
4. How often do you drink and how much do you usually consume in a typical drinking session?
5. Who do you usually drink with and where do you typically drink?
6. What kinds of alcoholic beverages do you prefer and why?
7. In your opinion, what do you think motivates young people to drink heavily in Taita-Taveta?
8. Have you ever engaged in heavy drinking? If so, can you describe the circumstances and motivations behind it?
9. How do you define heavy drinking? How does heavy drinking differ from regular drinking, if at all?
10. What do you think are the social and cultural factors that contribute to heavy drinking among young people in Taita-Taveta, Kenya?

Framing and representation of problematic drinking

- What would you say are the perspectives of the community in relation to young people from the community using alcohol?
- How is problematic drinking framed in Taita?
 - What are some of the local names used to refer to drinking? What about those used to refer to excessive drinking?
- What is so unique about the Taita and alcohol use? Why are Taita people associated with excessive drinking?

Drinking Contexts

- What are some of the things that you can say are related to problematic drinking here in Taita?
 - What would you consider the facilitators of problematic drinking in Taita?
 - What are some of the common social events or occasions where heavy drinking occurs in Taita-Taveta, Kenya?
 - How do gender and age affect heavy drinking patterns among young people in Taita-Taveta, Kenya?
- What are some of the alcoholic drinks consumed by young people in Taita?
 - Which are the most popular and why?
 - What determines the kind of drinks that one takes?
- How is alcohol infused in the lives of Taita people?
 - How does drinking fit into the social and cultural norms of your community?
 - Can you tell me about any rituals or practices associated with drinking in your community?
- What would you say sustains problem drinking in this community?
- What would you say alcohol does to people?
- What is used to make alcohol?

Interconnectedness of problem drinking and other realities

- What are the factors associated with problematic drinking?
 - What would you say are the different situations surrounding problematic drinking?
 - Can you describe any objects or materials that are commonly associated with drinking in your community, such as specific types of alcohol, drinking vessels, or clothing?
 - How do these objects/materials shape or influence the way people drink or think about drinking?
 - Are there any particular brands or types of alcohol that are considered desirable or prestigious in your community?
- How do the different factors come together or relate to influence problematic drinking?
- What would you attribute problematic drinking to?
 - Availability
 - Cost
 - Density of alcohol environments
 - How alcohol is produced or made

Response to problem drinking in Taita Taveta

- What resolutions and actions would you say have been made when it comes to responding to the problem of alcohol use among young people in Taita?
- What do you think are some possible ways to address or reduce heavy drinking among young people in Taita-Taveta, Kenya, if any?

Appendix 3: Participatory Workshops Sample Informed Consent Form

"Heavy Drinking" among Young People in Taita-Taveta Study
Kombo B. PhD Research Proposal



MAX RADY COLLEGE OF MEDICINE
RADY FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES
Department of Community Health Sciences

Centre for
Global Public Health
University of Manitoba
R070 Med Rehab Bldg
771 McDermot Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3E 0T6, Canada
Telephone: [redacted]
Fax: [redacted]
cgph@cc.umanitoba.ca

ENGLISH PARTICIPATORY GEOSPATIAL MAPPING CONSENT DOCUMENT

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Participatory Material Semiotics Geospatial Mapping

Title of Study: "The Material Semiotics of "Heavy Drinking" among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination".

Principal Investigator: Bernadette Kina Kombo,

University of Manitoba,



Co-Investigator: Dr Robert Lorway (PhD Advisor)

Sponsor: Not Applicable

Funder: David G. Fish Memorial Scholarship

INTERVIEW INFORMATION										
Respondent ID/UC.....										
Interviewer Name:										
Date of interview:		DAY	MONTH		YEAR					

Hello. My name is You are being asked to participate in a research study involving participatory geospatial mapping. Please take your time to review this consent form and discuss any

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questions you may have with the study staff, your friends, or family before you make your decision. This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the study staff to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

Purpose of this Study

This research study is being conducted to study how different factors relate and interconnect to shape heavy drinking among young people in Taita Taveta County. We want to understand from your perspective how heavy drinking is framed and represented in Taita Taveta County, and how young people's drinking problem is related with other social realities and fits in people's everyday lives.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because as a person who uses /sells/distributes/produces alcohol, you have experience and/or understanding of alcohol use contexts in the area.

A total of approximately 86 participants will be asked to participate in this study with about 32 participating in the participatory geospatial mapping.

Study procedures

- You have been selected to participate in the participatory material semiotics geospatial mapping. Participatory material semiotics geospatial mapping is about gathering together and recreating geographical data and related information and perspectives to show the interconnections of different factors that influence heavy drinking. In this study it will involve bringing together different stakeholders drawn from diversity of people ranging from alcohol users, producers and distributors, and sellers in Taita Taveta County. It will entail eliciting from them non-digital sketches to map alcohol outlets and focused discussions to reveal realities that make up problem drinking in Taita Taveta.
- Participation in the study will be for half a day in a workshop set-up.
- The principal investigator will facilitate and guide with the mapping exercise and thereafter ask questions and facilitate the discussion.
- A trained research assistant will also be present to help with the managing of the group exercises and in taking notes during the discussions.
- The group will be provided with materials that will be used to draw the non-digital sketches such as manila papers, pencils, colours among other resources that will be necessary.
- For the discussions, the group will be asked some questions relating to their experience and thoughts and ideas on the different realities and actors that make up problem drinking. These questions will help us to better understand heavy drinking in Taita Taveta county.
- The discussion session following the mapping exercise will be audio-recorded and the audio-recordings will be transcribed and translated into English where necessary by a trained young person who is conversant with the local linguistic dynamics. This is to ensure accurate reporting of the information that you provide.
- The transcriber will sign a form stating that they will not discuss any item on the recordings with anyone other than the researchers.
- At the start of the workshop everyone will be asked to respect the privacy of the other group

members. All participants will be asked not to disclose anything said within the context of the discussions and participation in the workshop, but it is important to understand that other people in the group with you may not keep all information private and confidential.

- No one's name will be asked or revealed during the recorded group discussions. However, should another participant call you by name, the transcriber will be instructed to remove all names from the transcripts and replace them with XXX.
- The audio-recordings will be downloaded immediately after the discussions and saved in a password protected computer until when they are transcribed. The audio recordings will be destroyed within two weeks of completing the transcriptions and cleaning of transcripts done. The transcripts on the other hand will be stored for 5 years following study completion and then anonymized and digitally archived for future analysis.
- You will not receive study findings as an individual but aggregated findings will be shared through different forums in the county and beyond to inform policy and practice.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no anticipated physical risks for anyone who agree to participate in the study. The study staff will make every effort to protect your privacy and confidentiality while you are in the study. The participatory material semiotics geospatial mapping group members will be asked to keep the information provided in the groups confidential; however, a potential risk that might exist for some would be that information about you might be discussed outside the group by other participants and be traced back to you. If this is a potential issue for you, you are encouraged to ask for an individual interview with one of the researchers who would then be knowledgeable of and bound by confidentiality.

It is also possible that talking about problem drinking might be emotional, embarrassing or stressful for you. I and other supporting psychological counsellors identified from nearby health facilities will be available if you feel like there is anything that has come up for you during the group discussions that is upsetting.

Should you need any additional help or support we will refer you to an already identified psychological counselor at a nearby health facility or help you to find other counseling help that you will be comfortable with.

Benefits

You will not receive any direct individual benefits for participating in the participatory mapping activities and the group discussions, but in contributing to the development of the non-digital sketches mapping alcohol outlets and contributing to the group discussions, and the information that will be gained by talking to you may help in understanding heavy drinking among young people in Taita Taveta and can inform relevant policies and programs in the future.

Costs

There is no cost to you to attend the participatory material semiotics geospatial mapping workshop.

Payment for participation

Study participation is voluntary, and you will receive no payment for taking part in this study. You will only be given KES 1200 for your time and travel expenses at the time of the participatory mapping workshop. During the workshop, conference facilities for a half-day workshop will be provided.

Confidentiality

We will do everything possible to keep your personal information confidential. Your name will not be used in any other study documents apart from the consent form. All signed consent forms which will bear participants' names will be kept in a file in a lockable cabinet that is only accessible to the researcher. If the results of this study are presented in a meeting, or published, nobody will be able to tell that you were in the study. Please note that although you will not be identified as the speaker, your words may be used to highlight a specific point. The collection and access to personal information will be in compliance with the Kenyan Law as well as the Canadian provincial and federal privacy legislations.

Some people or groups may need to check the study records to make sure all the information is correct. All of these people have a professional responsibility to protect your privacy.

These people or groups are:

- The Health Research Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba, and the AMREF Ethical and Scientific Review Committee which are responsible for the protection of people in research and have reviewed this study for ethical acceptability.
- Quality assurance staff of the University of Manitoba who ensure the study is being conducted properly.

All the group discussion data following the participatory mapping exercise will be recorded as audio recordings, and later transcribed for electronic storage. For data captured using the audio recorders, efforts will be made to ensure the devices are protected with a password. All electronic data will be kept strictly confidential, on secured servers, and/or password protected computers.

The generated visual maps from the participatory mapping exercise will first be captured digitally using a camera and the physical copies will be kept in a locked secure area and only those persons identified will have access to these records. If any of your research records need to be copied to any of the above, your name and all identifying information will be removed. No information revealing any personal information such as your name, address or telephone number will leave the University of Manitoba.

In future, information collected or generated during this study may be used to support new research on heavy drinking among young people by other researchers in Kenya and other African countries. In all cases, we will only share information with other researchers in ways that do not reveal individual participants' identities. For example, we will remove information that could identify people, such as

their names and where they live, and replace this information with number codes. Any future research using information from this study must first be approved by a local or national expert committee to make sure that the interests of participants and their communities are protected.

Permission to Quote:

We may wish to quote your words directly in reports and publications resulting from this. With regards to being quoted, please check yes or no for each of the following statements:

Researchers may publish documents that contain quotations by me under the following conditions:		
☐ Yes ☐ No	☐	I agree to be quoted directly (my name is used).
☐ Yes ☐ No	☐	I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published (I remain anonymous).
☐ Yes ☐ No	☐	I agree to be quoted directly if a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal from the Study

All participation in research is voluntary. You are free to decide if you want to take part or not. If you do agree you, can change your mind at any time. Your ability to participate in other parts of this study will not be affected by your decision.

Questions

If any questions come up during or after the study, contact the principal investigator: Bernadette Kina at [REDACTED]

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact The AMREF Health Africa Research Ethics Board at [REDACTED] or The University of Manitoba, Bannatyne Campus Research Ethics Board Office at [REDACTED]

Do not sign this consent form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of your questions.

Consent Signatures:

1. I have read all five pages of the consent form.
2. I have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of my questions.
3. I understand that by signing this consent form I have not waived any of my legal rights as a participant in this study.
4. I understand that my records, which may include identifying information, may be reviewed by the research staff working with the Principal Investigator and the agencies and organizations listed in the Confidentiality section of this document.

5. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time and my data may be withdrawn prior to publication.
6. I understand that my data may be used for future research
7. I understand that the group discussions will be audio-recorded
8. I understand I will be provided with a copy of the consent form for my records.
9. I agree to participate in the study.

Participant signature _____ Date _____
(day/month/year)

Participant printed name: _____

(For individuals who cannot read and write and require a witness)

I, the undersigned, attest that the information in the Participant Information and Consent Form was accurately explained to and apparently understood by the participant and that consent to participate in this study was freely given by the participant.

Witness signature _____ Date _____
(day/month/year)

Witness printed name: _____

I, the undersigned, have fully explained the relevant details of this research study to the participant named above and believe that the participant has understood and has knowingly given their consent

Printed Name: _____ Date _____
(day/month/year)

Signature: _____

Role in the study: _____

Relationship (if any) to study team members: _____

NB: All study participants will be issued with a copy of this information and consent form. In instances however that they decline to take a copy, that will be retained by the researcher with a clear mark of "participant's copy" and reason for declining.

Appendix 4: Sample Consent Form for Use of Photographs and Videos

"Heavy Drinking" among Young People in Taita-Taveta Study Kombo B. PhD Research Proposal	
 UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA	MAN RADY COLLEGE OF MEDICINE RADY FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES Department of Community Health Sciences
 Centre for Global Public Health University of Manitoba 8070 Med Rehab Bldg 771 McDermot Avenue Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 6T6, Canada Telephone: [Redacted] Fax: [Redacted]	
English Consent Form for Use of Photographs and Video Recordings of Individuals for Research Purposes	
Study Title	The Material Semiotics of "Heavy Drinking" among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination.
Investigator(s)	Principal Investigator: Bernadette Kina Kombo, Tel: [Redacted] Co-Investigator: Dr Robert Lorway, Tel: [Redacted]
Study Sponsor(s)	
Collaborators	
Project Details	
I Bernadette Kombo, a PhD student researcher at the University of Manitoba, I am conducting a study on "The Material Semiotics of "Heavy Drinking" among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination". In this study, as a researcher, I want to understand how heavy drinking is framed and represented in Taita Taveta County, and how young people's drinking problem is related with other social realities and fits in people's everyday lives. As part of this research project, the researcher may take photographs and/or record videos of yourself.	
Purpose	
The purpose of this form is to obtain your informed consent to take photographs and/or record videos of yourself during the data collection period, which may be used in reports and publications relating to the research project. By signing this form, you are giving permission to the research and the University of Manitoba to use your images and/or video recordings which could be potentially published or shared in academic and public forums.	
Use of Images	
Your images may be used for research purposes during the following stages of the research process:	
1. Data analysis 2. Dissemination a. Dissemination workshops or other forums, such as conferences, stakeholder meetings, etc. 3. Publications 4. Sharing on social media or other public forums to promote the research and its results.	
Version 1.1	17 April 2023
APPROVED	
Page 1 of 3	

Confidentiality

The lead researcher will make every effort to keep your images in a secure system that is only accessible by the research team during data collection. Release of information pertaining to your home or work addresses, telephone numbers, etc, will not be made public.

What are the risks?

The risks of participating in the research project and having your photograph and/or video taken may include the possibility of loss of privacy, breach of confidentiality, and accidental disclosure of personal information. There may also be some discomfort or inconvenience associated with having your photograph and/or video recording taken. Please note that when sharing the images on social media, the researcher and her affiliated institution the University of Manitoba will take steps to ensure that the images are not used inappropriately, including use of privacy settings and indicating that unauthorised use, sharing or manipulation of the images is prohibited. However, it is not possible to guarantee that the images will not be misused by other social media users. By signing this consent form, you acknowledge this risk and consent to the use of your images on social media or other public forums for the purpose of promoting the research and its results.

What are the benefits?

The benefits of participating in the research project and having your photograph and/or video recording taken include contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the field.

Voluntary Participation

You have a right to the following:

1. To choose whether your photograph and/or video recording is taken or recorded.
2. To decline to have your photograph taken and/or video recorded, and to withdraw the photograph and/or video recording at any time without affecting your relationship with [the researcher or their organization].
3. To select which areas and components can be photographed and/or video recorded.
4. To review the photograph and/or video recording before it is stored for use.
5. To choose where and how the photograph and/or video recording should be used.
6. To choose whether your name, age, city/town/village/county should be released to the public.

Contacts

If you have any questions or concerns about the use of your image, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher at [redacted] or email: [redacted]. For more information or to have questions regarding your rights as study participant, please contact the Scientific Review Committee (ESRC) on phone [redacted].

Signature

I have read and understood the purpose and details of this consent form, including the risks and benefits of participation. I freely give my informed consent to the use of my photographs and/or video recordings for research purposes as described. *I am over the minimum age of consent (aged 18 years and over), and I have full legal capacity to grant this consent and release.*

Print name of
Participant

Signature of
Participant

DD/MM/YYYY

Statement by the researcher/person taking consent.

I confirm that the study participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the taking and use of photographs and/or video recordings, and all the questions asked by the study participant were answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the study participant.

Print name of
researcher/person
taking the consent

Signature of
researcher/person
taking the consent

DD/MM/YYYY

Appendix 5: Sample Codebook Extract

Alcohol Study Codebook

Agency and Resistance
Community Participation
Community Resistance to Alcohol Interventions
<i>Challenges in enforcing alcohol bans</i>
<i>Community-led initiatives</i>
<i>Educational Institutions' Role</i>
<i>Grassroots campaigns and collective action</i>
Critiques of Alcohol Availability
<i>Community-based interventions</i>
<i>Criticism of alcohol regulation</i>
Efforts to Quit Drinking or Brewing
<i>Personal decisions and strategies</i>
<i>Resource Challenges</i>
<i>Social Stigma and Religion</i>
<i>Social Support</i>
Government and Policy Recommendations
Alcohol and other Drugs
Alcohol and Social Status
Alcohol Framing and cultural Identity
Awareness, Sensitization and Self-regulation
Branding and Marketing
Collective agency and Protection
Commodification of Alcohol Consumption
Consequences of Alcoholism
Familial and Societal Consequences
<i>Broken Families</i>
<i>Economic Dependency</i>
<i>Generational Conflict</i>
<i>Impact on Children</i>
Legal and Regulatory Consequences
<i>Ineffectiveness of fines and raids</i>

Appendix 6: University of Manitoba Ethics Certificate



Research Ethics and Compliance

Research Ethics Bannatyne
P126-770 Bannatyne Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3E 0W3

HEALTH RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD (HREB) CERTIFICATE OF FINAL APPROVAL FOR NEW STUDIES Full Board Review

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Bernadette Kina Kombo	INSTITUTION/DEPARTMENT: University of Manitoba/Community Health Sciences	ETHICS #: HS25828 (H2023:021)
HREB MEETING DATE: April 24, 2023	APPROVAL DATE: May 19, 2023	EXPIRY DATE: April 24, 2024
STUDENT PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR SUPERVISOR (If applicable): Dr. Robert Løwrey		
PROTOCOL NUMBER:	PROJECT OR PROTOCOL TITLE: The Material Semiotics of "Heavy Drinking" among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination	
SPONSORING AGENCIES AND/OR COORDINATING GROUPS: University of Manitoba -David G. Fish Memorial Scholarship		
Submission Date(s) of Investigator Documents: January 4, 2023, March 31, 2023 and May 8, 2023		REB Receipt Date(s) of Documents: January 4, 2023, April 3, 2023 and May 8, 2023

THE FOLLOWING ARE APPROVED FOR USE:

Document Name	Version (if applicable)	Date
Protocol: Revised Protocol along with proposal as outlined in revised University of Manitoba (UM) Bannatyne Campus Research Ethics Board Submission Form (submitted May 08, 2023) and Letters of Response dated March 31, 2023 and May 08, 2023- <u>Subject to local Research Ethics Board approval from AMREF Ethical and Scientific Review committee- PLEASE forward this certificate to the UM REB office prior to initiation of the study.</u>	V. 1.2	04 May 2023
Consent and Assent Form(s): RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM Individual Interview (English)	V. 1.2	04 May 2023
ENGLISH CONSENT FORM FOR USE OF PHOTOGRAPHS AND VIDEO RECORDINGS OF INDIVIDUALS FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES	V. 1.1	04 May 2023
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM Participatory Material Semiotics Geospatial Mapping (English)	V. 1.2	04 May 2023
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM Individual Interview (Kiswahili)	V. 1.1	04 May 2023
Kiswahili Consent Form for Use of Photographs and Video Recordings of Individuals for Research Purposes	V. 1.1	04 May 2023
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM Participatory Material Semiotics Geospatial Mapping (Kiswahili)	V. 1.1	04 May 2023
Other: Interview/Group Discussion Guiding Questions	V. 1.1	29 March 2023
The Recruitment Contact Card	V. 1.0	29 March 2023
Demographic Questionnaire	V. 1.0	January 4, 2023

CERTIFICATION

The University of Manitoba (UM) Health Research Board (HREB) has reviewed the research study/project named on this **Certificate of Final Approval** at the **full board meeting** date noted above and was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human participants. The study/project and documents listed above was granted final approval by the Chair or Acting Chair, UM HREB.

A unit of the office of the Vice-President (Research and International)

<http://umanitoba.ca/research/orec>

HREB ATTESTATION

The University of Manitoba (UM) Health Research Board (HREB) is organized and operates according to Health Canada/CH Good Clinical Practices, Tri-Council Policy Statement 2, and the applicable laws and regulations of Manitoba. In respect to clinical trials, the HREB complies with the membership requirements for Research Ethics Boards defined in Division 5 of the Food and Drug Regulations of Canada and carries out its functions in a manner consistent with Good Clinical Practices.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The University of Manitoba Research Quality Management Office may request to review research documentation from this research study/project to demonstrate compliance with this approved protocol and the University of Manitoba Policy on the Ethics of Research Involving Humans.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Any Principal or Co-Investigators of this study who are members of the UM HREB did not participate in the review or voting of this study.

CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL:

1. The study is acceptable on scientific and ethical grounds for the ethics of human use only. ***For logistics of performing the study, approval must be sought from the relevant institution(s).***
2. This research study/project is to be conducted by the local principal investigator listed on this certificate of approval.
3. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to the research study/project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to governing law.
4. **This approval is valid until the expiry date noted on this certificate of approval. A Bannatyne Campus Annual Study Status Report must be submitted to the REB within 15-30 days of this expiry date.**
5. Any changes of the protocol (including recruitment procedures, etc.), informed consent form(s) or documents must be reported to the HREB for consideration in advance of implementation of such changes on the **Bannatyne Campus Research Amendment Form**.
6. Adverse events and unanticipated problems must be reported to the REB as per Bannatyne Campus Research Boards Standard Operating procedures.
7. The UM HREB must be notified regarding discontinuation or study/project closure on the **Bannatyne Campus Final Study Status Report**.

Sincerely,



Chair, Health Research Ethics Board
Bannatyne Campus

- 2 -

Please quote the above Human Ethics Number on all correspondence.
Inquiries should be directed to the REB Secretary Telephone: (204) 789-3255/ Fax: (204) 789-3414

Appendix 7: Amref Ethics Approval Letter



REF: AMREF – ESRC P1423/2023

Amref Health Africa in Kenya

May 25, 2023

Bernadette Kina
University of Manitoba
66 Chancellors Cir, Winnipeg
MB R7T 2N2, Canada
Tel: +1
Email: [REDACTED]

Dear Bernadette Kina,

RESEARCH PROTOCOL: THE MATERIAL SEMIOTICS OF “HEAVY DRINKING” AMONG
YOUNG PEOPLE IN TAITA-TAVETA, KENYA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION

Thank you for submitting your protocol to the Amref Ethics and Scientific Review Committee (ESRC).

This is to inform you that the ESRC has reviewed and approved your protocol. Your application approval number is ESRC P1423/2023. The approval period is from May 25, 2023, to May 24, 2024, and is subject to compliance with the following requirements:

- a) Only approved documents (including informed consents, study instruments, advertising materials, material transfer agreements, etc.) will be used.
- b) All changes including (amendments, deviations, violations, etc.) are submitted for review and approval by Amref ESRC before implementation.
- c) Death and life-threatening problems and serious adverse events (SAEs) or unexpected adverse events whether related or unrelated to the study must be reported to the Amref ESRC within 72 hours of notification.
- d) Any changes, anticipated or otherwise that may increase the risks or affect safety or welfare of study participants and others or affect the integrity of the research must be reported to Amref ESRC within 72 hours.
- e) Clearance for export of biological specimen must be obtained from the relevant government authorities for each batch of shipment/export.
- f) Submission of a request for renewal of approval at least 60 days prior to expiry of the approval period. Attach a comprehensive progress report to support the renewal.
- g) In case of late renewal, the Amref ESRC shall not be held responsible for any serious adverse events (SAEs) that may occur as a result of research activities that were carried out after the expiry of approval.
- h) Submission of an executive summary report within 90 days upon completion of the study to the Amref ESRC.
- i) All government regulations for prevention and control of the spread of COVID-19 including social distancing, provision of personal protective equipment for participants and research assistants should be adhered to during data collection. All research assistants should be monitored for COVID 19 symptoms and referred for testing in case they present with symptoms.

Prior to commencing your study, you will be expected to obtain a research license from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) <https://research-portal.nacosti.go.ke> and also obtain other clearances needed.

Board Members: Mr J Kimeu | Mr G Macharia | Ms M Githinji | Ms E Munyoki | Mrs M Kinoti | Dr D Soti | Dr G Gitahi

P.O. Box 30125-00100 Nairobi, Tel: +254 (0)20 699 4000, Fax: +254 (0)20 699 2531. www.amref.org

Winner of the
Gates Award
BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION
for Global Health



Please do not hesitate to contact the ESRC Secretariat (esrc.kenya@amref.org) for any clarification or query.

Yours sincerely



er, Learning and Impact, Amref Health Africa.

Appendix 8: NACOSTI Research Permit

 REPUBLIC OF KENYA	 NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION
Ref No: 801697	Date of Issue: 30/June/2023
RESEARCH LICENSE	
	
This is to Certify that Ms. Bernadette Kina Kombo of University of Manitoba, has been licensed to conduct research as per the provision of the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013 (Rev.2014) in Taita-Taveta on the topic: The Material Semiotics of "Heavy Drinking" among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination. for the period ending : 30/June/2024.	
License No: NACOSTI/P/23/26825	
801697	
Applicant Identification Number	Director General
	NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION
	Verification QR Code
	
NOTE: This is a computer generated License. To verify the authenticity of this document, Scan the QR Code using QR scanner application.	
See overleaf for conditions	

Appendix 9: County Commissioner Approval Letter

REPUBLIC OF KENYA



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
MINISTRY OF INTERIOR AND NATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

County Commissioner's Office
Taita Taveta County
P.O. Box 1 - 80305
MWATATE

Email Address: cctaitataveta@yahoo.com
When replying please quote:
REF: CC/TVT/ADM.5/VOL.III (96)

7th August, 2023

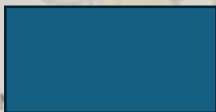
The Deputy County Commissioner
MWATATE
VOI

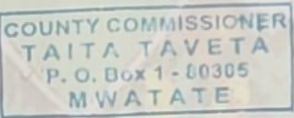
RE: RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION – MS. BERNADETTE KINA KOMBO

Reference is made to a letter REF. No. 801697 and License No. NACOSTI/P/23/26825 dated 30th June, 2023 from the Director General/National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation on the above subject matter.

The above named person has been authorized by this office to carry out research on *“The Material Semiotics of “Heavy Drinking” among Young People”* in Mwatate and Voi Sub County, Taita Taveta County for the period ending 30th June, 2024.

Kindly accord her the necessary support.

 IA
FOR: COUNTY COMMISSIONER
TAITA TAVETA COUNTY



Cc

The Director General
National Commission for Science Technology & Innovation
P.O. Box 30623-00100
MOMBASA, – Your letter REF. No. 801697 dated 30th June, 2023 refer

The County Director of Education
TAITA TAVETA

Ms. Bernadette Kina Kombo – On completion of the research, you are requested to submit a hard copy of the research report to this office.

Appendix 10: Voi sub-County Research Authorization

REPUBLIC OF KENYA



THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
MINISTRY OF INTERIOR AND NATIONAL ADMINISTRATION
State Department for Internal Security and National Administration

Telegrams: Deputy County Commissioner's Office
Telephone: Voi Sub County
Telefax: P.O. Box 1 – 80300
Email Address: dcvoi09@yahoo.com VOI
When replying please quote:
Ref: ADM.17/VOL.1/166 4th August 2023

The Assistant County Commissioners
VOI SUB COUNTY

RE: RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION –MS. BERNADETTE KINA KOMBO

Reference No.801697 and Licence No. NACOSTI/P/23/26825 is made to a letter dated 30th June, 2023 from the National Commission for Science, Technology & Innovation on the above subject matter.

The above named person has been authorized to carry out a Research on ***“the Material Semiotics of Heavy Drinking Among Young People in Voi Sub County, Taita Taveta County-Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination”*** for a period ending 30th June 2024.

The purpose of this letter is therefore to accord her the necessary support she needs towards completion of the research project.


FOR: DEPUTY COUNTY COMMISSIONER
VOI SUB COUNTY



Copy to:
✓ Ms. Bernadette Kina Kombo

Appendix 11: County Department of Health Approval Letter

THE COUNTY GOVERNMENT OF TAITA TAVETA
OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE FOR HEALTH SERVICES



Telephone: 0432030745/6
Email: [REDACTED]

P.O. Box 1216-80304
Wundanyi

Ref. No. TTVT/HS/CDH/VOL.2/(508) Date: 24th July, 2023

Bernadette Kina Kombo
PhD Student
University of Manitoba
P.O Box 29347-00100
NAIROBI

RE: APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH TITLED "THE MATERIAL SEMIOTICS OF 'HEAVY DRINKING' AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN TAITA-TAVETA, KENYA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION"

This is reference to your request to approve your study on "the Material Semiotics of 'Heavy Drinking' Among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination".

We have reviewed your study documents and the ethical review approval document from AMREF (ESRC – P1423/2023) and research permit from NACOSTI (License No: NACOSTI/P/23/26825) to carry out the research in Taita-Taveta County.

With this letter you can proceed with the research with different stake holders in the County as outlined in your protocol.

We are pleased to work with you on this study and looking forward to receiving the full report of the findings to help us further strengthen our Public Health Sector in the County.

We look forward to engage more including dissemination of study findings to all relevant stakeholders.

Yours Sincerely,
[REDACTED]

**COUNTY GOVERNMENT
COUNTY DIRECTOR
JUL 2023
COUNTY DIRECTOR, HEALTH SERVICES
TAITA TAVETA COUNTY
P.O. Box 1216-80304, WUNDANYI**

Cc. CECM-Health Services
CCO-Health Services
County Research Coordinator

Appendix 12: Kenya Police County Commander Authorization

KENYA POLICE SERVICE P.194

Telegram: "POLICE"
Telephone: _____
When replying Please Quote:
Email: [REDACTED]

County Police Headquarters
Taita Taveta
P.O. Box 17
VOI

REF: KPS/DIG/CST/T/TVT/SEC/ADM/68/2 DATE: 14/02/2024

THE SCPC MWATATE
MWATATE SUB COUNTY

✓ THE SCPC VOI
VOI SUB COUNTY

RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION – MS. BERNADETTE KINA KOMBO

The above named person has been authorized to carry out research on "the material semiotics of 'Heavy Drinking among Young People' in Mwatate and Voi sub counties, Taita Taveta County for the period ending 30th June, 2024.

Kindly accord her the necessary support by allowing her to interact with police officer in your commands.

Attached for your reference is a letter Ref: no. 801697 and license No. NACOSTI/P/23/26825 dated 30th June, 2023 from the Director General /National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation and an authorization letter Ref: CC/TVT/ADM.5/VOL.III (96) from the County Commissioner on the above subject matter.



[REDACTED]

**FOR: COUNTY POLICE COMMANDER
TAITA TAVETA**

Appendix 13: Sample Interviews Informed Consent Form

"Heavy Drinking" among Young People in Taita-Taveta Study
Kombo B. PhD Research Proposal



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

MAX RADY COLLEGE OF MEDICINE
RADY FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES
Department of Community Health Sciences

Centre for
Global Public Health
University of Manitoba
R070 Med Rehab Bldg
771 McDermott Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3E 0T6, Canada
Telephone: [REDACTED]
Fax: [REDACTED]
Cell: [REDACTED]

ENGLISH INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW CONSENT DOCUMENT
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Individual Interview

Title of Study: "The Material Semiotics of "Heavy Drinking" among Young People in Taita-Taveta, Kenya: An Ethnographic Examination".

Principal Investigator: Bernadette Kina Kombo,
University of Manitoba,
[REDACTED]

Co-Investigator: Dr Robert Lorway (PhD Advisor)

Sponsor: Not Applicable

Funder: David G. Fish Memorial Scholarship

INTERVIEW INFORMATION

Respondent ID/UC: [A][1][1][G][0][1][1][M]

Interviewer Name: [B][K]

Date of Interview:

DAY	MONTH	YEAR
29	02	2024

APPROVED

Hello. My name is -----, You are being asked to participate in a research study involving individual interview. Please take your time to review this consent form and discuss any questions you may have with the study staff, your friends, or family before you make your decision. This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the study staff to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

Purpose of this Study

This research study is being conducted to study how different factors relate and interconnect to shape heavy drinking among young people in Taita Taveta County. We want to understand from your perspective how heavy drinking is framed and represented in Taita Taveta County, and how young people's drinking problem is related with other social realities and fits in people's everyday lives.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because as a young person/family member of a young person of between 18 years to 35 years with a drinking problem/producer/distributor/government official/patron from a drinking space, you have experience/understanding of alcohol contexts in the area.

A total of approximately 86 participants will be asked to participate.

Study procedures

- The methods of data collection for this study will be individual interviews, and participatory material semiotics geospatial mapping. You have been selected to participate in the individual interviews. Individual interviews entail talking to individuals who know something about the topic of interest. Individual interviews help in exploring people's experiences, opinions, thoughts and ideas about a specific topic.
- Participation in the study will be for **about 1 hour**.
- I will be the one conducting the interview as the principal investigator of the study.
- You will be asked some questions relating to your experience with alcohol use contexts in Taita Taveta County. These questions will help us to better understand heavy drinking among young people in Taita Taveta and how it relates with other aspects of people's everyday lives.
- The interview sessions will be audio-recorded using a digital recorder and the audio-records will be transcribed and translated into English where necessary by a trained young person who is conversant with the local linguistic dynamics. This is to ensure accurate reporting of the information that you provide.
- The transcriber will sign a form stating that they will not discuss any item on the recordings with anyone other than the researchers.
- Naturally when we are telling about our experiences or describing different scenarios, we sometimes use identifying information such as names. In an instance that you have mentioned any names, the transcriber will be instructed to remove all names from the transcripts and replace them with XX.
- The audio-recordings will be downloaded immediately after the interview and saved in a password protected computer until when they are transcribed. The audio recordings will be destroyed within two weeks of completing the transcriptions and cleaning of transcripts done.

The transcripts on the other hand will be stored for 5 years following study completion and then anonymized and digitally archived for future analysis.

- Where need be and if more information or clarification is needed, the researcher will contact you for a follow up interview at a future date.
- You will not receive study findings as an individual but aggregated findings will be shared through different forums in the county and beyond to inform policy and practice.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no anticipated physical risks for anyone who agree to participate in the study. The study staff will make every effort to protect your privacy and confidentiality while you are in the study. However, it is possible that others may learn you are participating in an interview and make assumptions about you and issues surrounding heavy drinking. If this is a potential issue for you, you are encouraged to suggest an alternative interview venue that you will be comfortable with, and your privacy will be guaranteed.

It is also possible that you may find talking about problem drinking to be upsetting or emotional. You do not have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable or that you find too upsetting.

Should you need any additional help or support we will refer you to an already identified psychological counselor at a nearby health facility or help you to find other counseling help that you will be comfortable with.

Benefits

You will not receive any direct individual benefits for participating in the interview, but in answering our questions and the information that will be gained by talking to you may help in understanding heavy drinking among young people in Taita Taveta and can inform relevant policies and programs in the future.

Costs

There is no cost to you to attend the individual interview.

Payment for participation

Study participation is voluntary, and you will receive no payment for taking part in this study. You will only be given KES 500 for your time and travel expenses at the time of the interview, and a similar amount in case of any subsequent follow up interviews.

Confidentiality

We will do everything possible to keep your personal information confidential. Your name will not be used in any other study documents apart from the consent form. All signed consent forms which will bear participants' names will be kept in a file in a lockable cabinet that is only accessible to the researcher. If the results of this study are presented in a meeting, or published, nobody will be able to tell that you were in the study. Please note that although you will not be identified as the speaker, your words may be used

to highlight a specific point. The collection and access to personal information will be in compliance with the Kenyan Law as well as the Canadian provincial and federal privacy legislations.

Some people or groups may need to check the study records to make sure all the information is correct. All of these people have a professional responsibility to protect your privacy.

These people or groups are:

- The Health Research Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba, and the AMREF Ethical and Scientific Review Committee which are responsible for the protection of people in research and have reviewed this study for ethical acceptability
- Quality assurance staff of the University of Manitoba who ensure the study is being conducted properly

All interview data will be recorded as audio recordings during data collection, and later transcribed for electronic storage. For data captured using the audio recorders, efforts will be made to ensure the devices are protected with a password. All electronic data will be kept strictly confidential, on secured servers, and/or password protected computers.

All records will be kept in a locked secure area and only those persons identified will have access to these records. If any of your research records need to be copied to any of the above, your name and all identifying information will be removed. No information revealing any personal information such as your name, address or telephone number will leave the University of Manitoba.

In future, information collected or generated during this study may be used to support new research on heavy drinking among young people by other researchers in Kenya and other African countries. In all cases, we will only share information with other researchers in ways that do not reveal individual participants' identities. For example, we will remove information that could identify people, such as their names and where they live, and replace this information with number codes. Any future research using information from this study must first be approved by a local or national expert committee to make sure that the interests of participants and their communities are protected.

Permission to Quote:

We may wish to quote your words directly in reports and publications resulting from this. With regards to being quoted, please check yes or no for each of the following statements:

Researchers may publish documents that contain quotations by me under the following conditions:	
☐ Yes ☒ No	I agree to be quoted directly (my name is used).
☒ Yes ☐ No	I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published (I remain anonymous).

☒ Yes ☐ No	I agree to be quoted directly if a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.
--	--

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal from the Study

All participation in research is voluntary. You are free to decide if you want to take part or not. If you do agree you, can change your mind at any time. Your ability to participate in other parts of this study will not be affected by your decision.

Questions

If any questions come up during or after the study, contact the principal investigator: Bernadette Kina at [REDACTED].

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact The AMREF Health Africa Research Ethics Board at [REDACTED] or The University of Manitoba, Bannatyne Campus Research Ethics Board Office at [REDACTED].

Do not sign this consent form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of your questions.

Consent Signatures:

1. I have read all five pages of the consent form.
2. I have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of my questions.
3. I understand that by signing this consent form I have not waived any of my legal rights as a participant in this study.
4. I understand that my records, which may include identifying information, may be reviewed by the research staff working with the Principal Investigator and the agencies and organizations listed in the Confidentiality section of this document.
5. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time and my data may be withdrawn prior to publication.
6. I understand that my data may be used for future research.
7. I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded.
8. I understand I will be provided with a copy of the consent form for my records.
9. I agree to participate in the study.

Participant signature [REDACTED]

Date 29/2/2024

(day/month/year)

Participant printed name: [REDACTED]

(For individuals who cannot read and write and require a witness)

I, the undersigned, attest that the information in the Participant Information and Consent Form was accurately explained to and apparently understood by the participant and that consent to participate in this study was freely given by the participant.

Witness signature _____

Date _____

(day/month/year)

Witness printed name: _____

I, the undersigned, have fully explained the relevant details of this research study to the participant named above and believe that the participant has understood and has knowingly given their consent.

Printed Name: Bernadette King Date 29/02/2024

(day/month/year)

Signature: 

Role in the study: PI

Relationship (if any) to study team members: KA

NB: All study participants will be issued with a copy of this information and consent form. In instances however that they decline to take a copy, that will be retained by the researcher with a clear mark of "participant's copy" and reason for declining.