

Amani ya Yaaku (Peace for the Yaaku)

Edwin Pokisa, Northwestern University

Location: Kenya

Dates: June 20 to September 5, 2022

Background

I come from a small village in Laikipia County, a semi-arid part of Kenya. Our village is occupied mostly by my people, the Yaaku tribe, an indigenous minority and marginalized community in Kenya. Indeed, UNESCO declared the Yaakunte language extinct in a 2010 report, yet we still speak it today. When Kenya declared independence, the Yaaku people were considered part of the Maasai community, into which we slowly assimilated. Now, the government of Kenya considers us part of the Maasai, but the Maasai look down on us because we are hunter-gatherers and beekeepers, while they care primarily about livestock. They call us by the derogatory name *dorobo*, meaning “poor people with few cattle” in Maa. Because of this discrimination, we are allocated few resources and live in an underdeveloped region that lacks access to clean water; social amenities, such as schools and hospitals; and basic infrastructure, like tarmacked roads. This history motivates me to do more for my community and create awareness about our people, our heritage, and our culture, especially to other Kenyans.

Intervention

I aim to raise awareness about our tribe and its history among all Kenyans while bringing income to the Yaaku from new small businesses that revolve around two important parts of our culture: honey harvesting and beadwork.

The Yaaku have long practiced beekeeping, and their honey is truly organic. Honey harvesting is done only by the men. It is done at night so that the men are secluded and the bees cannot sting the rest of the village. Our harvesters lack protective gear but have been doing this work for generations, so they are used to the stings. The result is the most flavorful honey I have ever tasted. I want to help the Yaaku develop a honey-harvesting cooperative, where harvesters can come together to brand, market, and sell their honey across Kenya. In addition to creating a brand and market for Yaaku honey, each jar will come with a short history of our people and a few Yaakunte words to teach the public about our language.

The Yaaku also make beautiful beaded ornaments for our own cultural traditions and rituals. Beadwork is done primarily by women, and they learn the art from a young age. The products are used by both men and women, and they feature in such cultural practices as weddings, rituals, and community events. Outside of the community, there is a market for beaded products, mainly among tourists who come to Kenya for safaris. I seek to develop a stable beadmaking business for Yaaku women. They can work together to market and sell their products to tourists across Kenya and share their profits with each other and the Yaaku community. By increasing incomes, we can raise the standard of living for many households and empower women in our community.

As the project grows, I hope to collaborate with the county government, with safari companies and other tourism outfits, with private investors, and with NGOs whose financial assistance and expertise will expand the project. These partnerships will help the Yaaku improve their living conditions and bring recognition of our community to the rest of Kenya.

Long-Term Goals

I hope that a percentage of the profits from my honey and beadmaking project will eventually be reinvested into the community in a number of ways, including but not limited to creating youth empowerment programs, such as education assistance, tutoring groups, youth mentorship programs, and youth sports competitions; and organizing community talent and fashion shows to highlight our abilities and cultural practices. Profits could also be used to start other projects in the area, including the building of a community borehole to bring potable water to the area and agricultural projects that can introduce farming to the Yaaku.

Implementation

In the first two weeks, I will identify and train project participants. In particular, I will seek community leaders and partner NGOs who can offer pro bono branding and marketing expertise as well as legal advice to assist with drawing up the required documents for the businesses. I have already secured a partnership with the NGO Kenya Scholar Access Program, which has a branding and marketing department that will provide me with small business mentors.

For the next five weeks of the project, I will implement the honey harvesting and beadmaking efforts. I will liaise with the men who harvest honey while working with the marketing team to jar and brand the honey, and I will work with the women on our first batch of beadwork ornaments. I will work closely with the marketing team to ensure that the honey and beads provide buyers with the history and culture of the Yaaku through the labels on the products we produce together.

By the eighth week of the project, I aim to partner with the marketing team to begin selling to the local community. We will start in Nanyuki, a nearby town at the foothills of Mount Kenya that is near many safari camps and is known for its tourism. At this point, I will assess the success of our strategies and then adjust accordingly as we seek to expand our sales to Nairobi, then to other leading destinations for tourists across Kenya.

To help ensure sustainability, I will create a group of Yaaku ambassadors among members of the community who participate in the honey-harvesting and beadwork project. These ambassadors will then manage and monitor the businesses, updating the partner NGOs and team members while striving to improve upon the business model.

Qualifications

I am a freshman at Northwestern University, majoring in social policy in the School of Education and Social Policy. My passion for my tribe led me to major in social policy, which can help train me to become a voice for the voiceless Yaaku. During my gap year before beginning my studies at Northwestern, I worked as an intern at Equity Bank LTD Kenya. My main concentration was marketing and sales. Here, I sold and marketed Equitel Sim cards, and I championed the sales of certain perfumes, called Top Scents, in our county. I will use that experience and knowledge to facilitate the marketing and selling of honey and beads in my project.

Partner Organization: Kenya Scholar Access Program (KenSAP)

KenSAP is a college access program that helps high-achieving, low-income high school graduates gain admission to the most selective colleges and universities in North America, all with full financial aid. KenSAP will connect me with several branding and marketing professionals in Nairobi and a few alumni who work in marketing and similar fields.

Name: Edwin Pokisa
Project Name: Amani ya Yaaku (Peace for the Yaaku)
School: Northwestern University

Note: all funds in US dollars.

Projects for Peace grant: \$ 10,000.00
 Additional Funding, if any: \$ -
Total funding available: \$ 10,000.00

TOTAL FUNDS REMAINING:
 \$ -

TOTAL EXPENDITURES:
 \$ 10,000.00

Student Expenses					Project Expenses				
Travel (Including Airfare)	Lodging	Communications	Food (Biweekly)	Miscellaneous	Non-Student Travel and Lodging	Direct Equipment and Supplies	Marketing and Event Support	Staffing Costs	Miscellaneous
1500					1300	2600	1800	2000	800
Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total
\$ 1,500.00	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 1,300.00	\$ 2,600.00	\$ 1,800.00	\$ 2,000.00	\$ 800.00

Total Student Expenses: \$ 1,500.00

Total Project Expenses: \$ 8,500.00