



PROFILE

Casting the net for less in the Bagamoyo fisheries —Mwanahawa and Kulthum

Ushimba (small-shrimp) collectors from Bagamoyo, Tanzania

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All their lives, Mwanahawa (41) and Kulthum (22) have lived in Bagamoyo in the north eastern part of Tanzania, an area known to be rich in a variety of marine species owing to the varied ecosystems to be found there—sandy and muddy tidal flats, mangroves, coral reefs, rocky intertidal platforms, sea grass and algal beds, lagoons and estuaries.

Mwanahawa and Kulthum make their living from *kutanda ushimba* or collecting small shrimp. Such shrimp (*Acetes* sp.) are to

be found along the inner shores of the Indian Ocean. This activity however is traditionally not regarded as *uvuvi* or fishing by the coastal communities, for whom fishing means only the capture fisheries, a domain of men. Yet, collecting *ushimba* has been an age-long endeavor, one that for long has provided an accessible livelihood option for coastal women. Unlike fishing, it does not require a license for entry; all the gear required is a net, or even just a piece of cloth, called *khanga*, to serve as a net; but what it does is demand physical endurance for the periods of time spent in the waters. The women go out in groups of three, usually comprising close family members. The trade is passed down the generations, usually from mother to daughter, grand-daughter or daughter-in-law.

Kulthum entered the trade when she was 12 and Mwanahawa at 20. Only fifteen known *ushimba* collectors remain today in Bagamoyo from a previously recorded number of 20.

The dwindling numbers are because the work is hard and the income from it simply not enough. Normal daily catch size today is about four containers weighing about ten kg each. Selling at TShs 10,000 per container, (US\$ 5.71) the women can get TShs 40,000 (US\$ 22.87) a day, which is divided amongst the three group members. Dried *ushimba* sold inland fetches more income but is in demand only during the dry season when fresh *ushimba* is scarce. Just five years ago, a group of women could easily hope to harvest up to ten containers a day. What explains this decline in catch?

Ushimba, according to Mwanahawa and Kulthum, is collected during the monthly *bamvua* or spring tide. They say that the catch has been falling because of the recent entry of male collectors leading to greater competition. Also, some of the newer entrants use sophisticated fishing gear capable of greater extraction. Indeed, the numbers of fishers and boats officially recorded in the region, has more than doubled in the last 25 years. Says Kulthum, “During spring tide, many fishers converge in these waters using *ngalawa* (small vessels), and cast seine nets to which nets with small mesh size are illegally attached. So they end up catching even the small shrimp that used to come up to the near shore waters where we women traditionally have fished”. Mwanahawa adds that in earlier days, the men of the community would leave near shore spaces for women; however today, the entry of outsiders has upset this traditional understanding.

Changing land use patterns means that agriculture as an alternate livelihood option is also outside the reach of Mwanahawa, Kulthum and the other *ushimba* collectors of Bagamoyo. Their only hope today is to secure petty loans from village community banks to establish small businesses of their own. These however are still in the making. ❏