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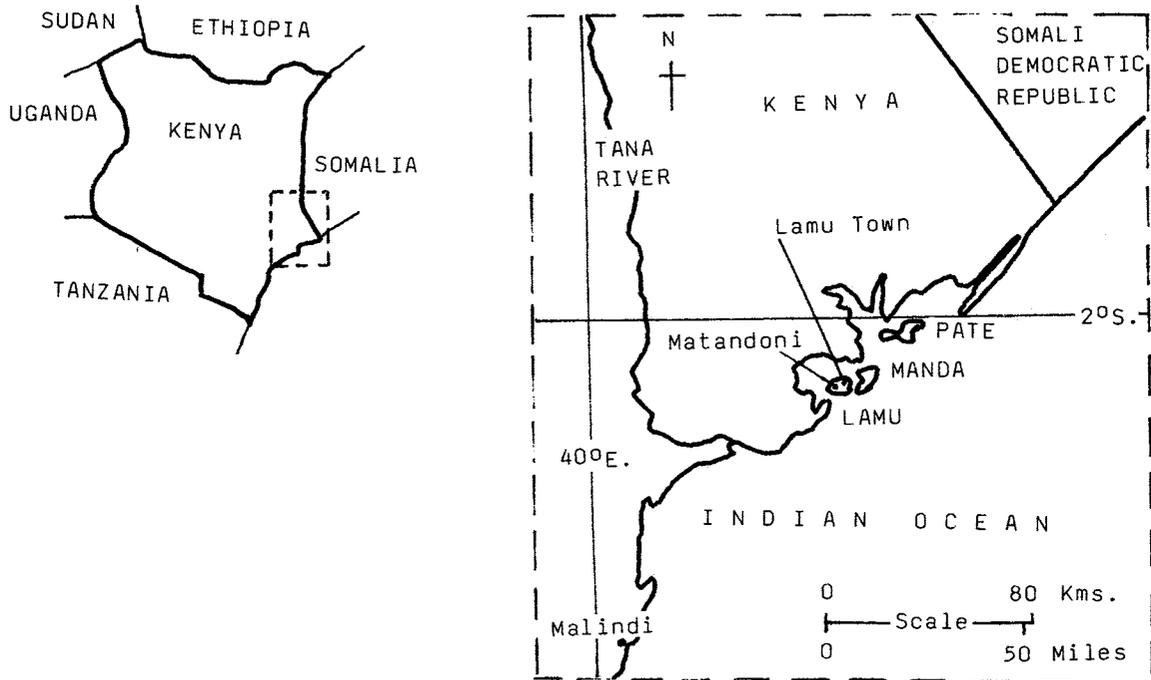
Lamu: A Glimpse into the Past

Bururi, Burundi  
10 February 1987

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock Street  
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Dear Peter,

A brief holiday recently afforded a fascinating glimpse into Africa's past -- 18th and 19th century Swahili culture in Lamu, on the Kenyan coast. The Lamu archipelago is located in the Indian Ocean, north of the Tana River and south of Somalia (see map). Lamu is -- along with the island of Zanzibar, in Tanzania -- the best surviving example of Swahili architecture and culture. The archipelago includes the islands of Lamu, Manda, and Pate.



Map. LAMU ARCHIPELAGO. (Adapted from: Fodor's Kenya. New York: Fodor's Travel Guides, 1985, p. 167.)

Landing at the airstrip on Manda Island, our seven-passenger plane taxied along the gravel runway, and parked near two other small planes. The "terminal", as such, consisted of a small boarded-up building, with signs announcing a (now defunct?) duty-free shop and sodas for sale. In front of the building were several wooden benches, shaded by a thatched roof. Placards advertise hotels and airlines serving the area. Several local tour guides were awaiting the arriving tourists.

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Two guys grabbed our bags and placed them in a wooden push cart. Then they headed a few hundred yards down a gravel path, bordered by the black mud of the mangrove swamp, to the boat landing. Sheltered from the wind, we could feel the intense bright tropical sun. When we arrived, a motorized dhow\* was approaching the dock. A good breeze was up, with whitecaps on the waves. The waves tossed the boat about, as the crew threw lines to people on the dock. A long, steep stone staircase led from the boat up to the dock. Passengers gingerly picked their way up the slick, spray-washed steps, while crew members hoisted up baggage. A second motorized dhow arrived, tying up to the first, and passengers scrambled into the first boat and up the steps. Our bags were tossed down, and we followed.

One of our self-appointed guides, Nassar, explained that the town of Lamu, on Lamu Island, was directly across the inlet. Our boat, operating as a public ferry, filled up with tourists, local residents, suitcases, bags of maize meal, and boxes of other provisions. As we were getting ready to cast off, a third dhow arrived, sailing up and dropping its sail. As we left the dock, it was cast adrift. We circled back, grabbing a line from the boat, and towing it back to the dock. As we crossed the inlet, the crew collected a 5 Kenyan shilling (US\$ 0.30) fare from the passengers.

After fifteen minutes, we landed on the opposite shore. Our two guides grabbed our bags and led us to our waterfront hotel, Petley's Inn, two short blocks from the dock. We passed several offices, a small hotel-restaurant, and a bank. Nassar pointed out some old Swahili carved wooden doors and doorframes. The waterfront was busy, with dhows being unloaded, donkeys carrying loads of coconut or coral, people walking by or lounging about.

Young local men were usually dressed in shirts and slacks. Older men more typically wore long fabric wrapped around as skirts, and embroidered hats. Local women were dressed in "casual purdah", with thin black fabric covering their heads and clothes, loosely fastened, with veils dangling. School children wore their uniforms, the girls in blouses and skirts, the boys in shirts and shorts. School uniforms were in several color combinations, including the classic white tops and khaki bottoms, and striking bright pink tops and royal blue bottoms.

Tourists seemed to fall into two general categories. Some were dressed in casual summer Western wear, such as cotton shirts and skirts. Others wore a "degenerate hippie" style, combining T-shirts with local wrap-around skirts (both men and women), and often toting backpacks. Lamu is evidently a favorite stop for the low-budget, long-term Western travelers, along with places like Bali, Indonesia and Kathmandu, Nepal.

Nassar offered us a tour of the town. As he had helped with our bags, we agreed to use his services and bartered him down a third on his original price. Nassar began by explaining that, due to the old narrow streets, vehicle traffic was impractical -- there was nowhere to go. The only car on the island, a Land Rover, belongs to the District Commissioner, who drives it between home and office. A town tractor and trailer hauls garbage.

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\*(According to Allen (1974), the Swahili word "dau" means sailing ship: many different types, and sizes, exist. "Dhow" is the English spelling. Today some traditional boats, however, have motors in place of sails.)

Most people rely upon donkeys for hauling goods and transport. Nassar claimed that Lamu has more donkeys than people -- perhaps 15,000 donkeys. Apparently the donkeys are often trying to escape from their owners, so they don't have to work. Watching one donkey contentedly munching discarded papaya peels, I could understand why such freedom would be more appealing than hauling baskets full of the heavy coral used for construction.

Lamu Town dates from at least the 12th century, and was quite prominent from the 17th to 19th centuries. The Swahili culture that grew up in Lamu and surrounding areas is a unique blend of Arab and African elements, along with a bit of colonial Portuguese and later British influences. Although the Swahili language is the most widely used language throughout eastern Africa, other aspects of Swahili culture persist only along the Kenyan and Tanzanian coast. Many buildings in the old Swahili town of Lamu date from the 18th century. Lamu, Nassar told us, has about 10,000 inhabitants, 24 Muslim mosques, and one Catholic church.

We walked first along the waterfront, passing the post office, District Commissioner's office, museum and the Forestry Department office. We came to a carpentry shop, where handed-carved wooden doors, chests, and furniture are made following fairly traditional techniques. Farther along the shore, on the outskirts of town, was the town dump, where piles of garbage were burning and marabou storks were scavenging for food.

Turning inland, we walked into a residential area. Houses formed a continuous facade of plastered coral, with occasional doorways and few windows. As the houses are two to four stories tall, the narrow walkways between them are cool and shaded. The walkways form a mysterious-seeming labyrinth, reminiscent of the "medinas" found in North Africa. The walkways have built-in gutters. Some walkways are constructed to slope down towards the sea, to provide for drainage of sewage and torrential rains. We had to watch out for people riding through on donkeys, children chasing one another, and cats wandering about. Located amongst the houses were some ground-floor shops, usually consisting of one or two rooms, with a wide, open doorway in which were hung fabrics, plastic wares, and other goods.

We visited an 18th century Swahili house, recently restored as a museum. As we walked through a courtyard, a man was drawing water from a deep well using a bucket and pulley. The house had a small foyer, then lead into a couple of public rooms. Here guests would have been received. Bedrooms were located in the alcoves, separated off by hanging curtains made of bright, locally-woven, striped fabrics. Beds were covered with mosquito nets. The main wall was decorated by plasterwork and a matrix of niches, in which were located old Chinese decorative porcelain plates and vases, and a hand-lettered copy of the Koran.

Off the main rooms were located a guest room and a bath room. The bathroom contained a drainage hole used as a toilet and a tub filled with water from a cistern. Inhabitants would wash themselves by dipping water out of the tub and pouring it over themselves. In the bottom of the tub were a few tiny fishes, who serve to eat any mosquitoes that might breed in the water. A porcelain bowl was set in the bottom of the tub, to hold a bit of water for the fish when the tub was drained. For the 18th century, these bathroom facilities were quite sophisticated.

A stairway led up to the roof. The kitchen, an enclosed room, was placed here, so that cooking odors would blow away and not permeate the entire house. Traditional cooking implements were displayed, such as a carved wooden bench on which one would sit to grate coconuts (the grater was attached to the end of the bench), a strainer used to make coconut milk, several types of baskets, a wooden press to make vermicelli noodles, and wooden spoons. Cooking was done over wood or charcoal, using a traditional three-stone fireplace.

After visiting the house, we continued our tour, going by the public marketplace. As it was late in the afternoon, the fish and meat market had already closed. But the produce sellers were still displaying their wares -- tomatoes, oranges, papayas, pineapples, carrots, okra, onions, potatoes, bananas, coconuts, mangoes. Pointing out bundles of mysterious leaves, Nassar explained that it was "gat", or "qat" -- a leaf chewed for its narcotic qualities, which is now illegal in many areas, such as neighboring Somalia. Around the marketplace small shops were selling various goods, such as plastic buckets, shoes, cloth and clothing, photocopies, and film.

Leaving the old Swahili part of town, we walked into an area where the houses were built of mud and wattle. These houses used to have cooler roofs of thatch, made from coconut fronds. After a devastating fire a few years ago, however, the Kenyan government raised money to provide corrugated metal roofing. We also saw the Riadha Mosque, famous for its yearly celebration of Maulidi, the birthday of the Prophet, when Muslims come from near and far to join in the festivities. Nearby a new Shi'ite mosque is being built with Iranian financing.

Walking back towards the water, we passed several huge stacks of mangrove poles. The mangrove poles are exported to Saudia Arabia for construction purposes, such as building of balconies. The exploitation of the nearby mangrove swamps is one of Lamu's major industries -- the other being tourism.

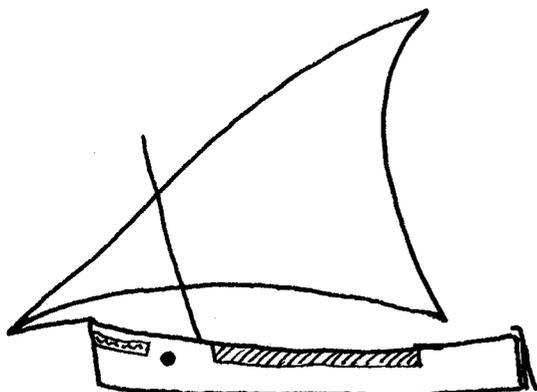
The following day we visited the Lamu Museum, which is set in an old Swahili house. The Museum is an excellent one, which recounts the history of the Lamu Archipelago, through its illustrious days as a major trading area. With the monsoon trade winds, large dhows would sail in from India and Arabia, returning several months later. Lamu made its wealth on the trade of a variety of goods, such as cowrie shells, rhino horn, ivory, silver, carved wooden furniture, combs, and other objects made of ebony or mahogany. During the 19th Century, Indian furniture and American wall clocks became common parts of Lamu decor. The Museum also had small-scaled replicas of a wide variety of dhows.

That afternoon we went by boat to visit Matandoni, another village on Lamu Island. Matandoni is a small sleepy town, little influenced by modern life, carved out of the mangrove coastline. A local guide, Mohammed, welcomed us with some sodas and asked where we were from. After replying the United States, he showed us a yellowed and worn clipping from a U.S. newspaper, dated 1981, about a local dhow builder.

As Mohammed led us around Matandoni, he pointed out all the ways in which mangrove trees and coconut trees were used by the local people. Children from a Koranic school were getting some exercise by moving a pile of mangrove poles. Coconut fronds are used for making mats and baskets. A certain type of mat is wrapped over the tops of the sides of the dhows (perhaps serving as anti-skid footing). Coconut husk fibers are used for making rope. Houses are built of mangrove poles, coral, and mud, with coconut frond thatch roofs. Matandoni, like Lamu town, also had variety of fruit trees planted, such as mango, guava, lemon, and tamarind.

We saw two dhows under construction, and another under repair. The Dhows are constructed of local mangrove wood and mahogany planks from the mainland. A 25-foot sailing dhow takes a carpenter and his assistant three months to build and sells for 40,000 Kenyan shillings (US\$ 2,500). Dhows are built to order, with a purchaser paying a 50 percent downpayment, and the balance upon delivery.

Dhows are typically decorated with a nameplaque and an "eye" on each side near the bow. Dhow eyes are round pieces of wood, carved with a design such as a star and crescent, or a horse, painted in red, white, and black. These eyes protect the dhow from unseen dangers, such as hidden rocks.



A small traditional sailing dhow, still common in the Lamu region.



A typical "dhow eye".

While on Lamu Island, we dined on local specialties, such as kingfish cooked in coconut milk with spices and prawn curry. With the hot sun, we quenched our thirst with fresh local fruit juices, such as lime, tamarind, lemon, orange, watermelon, and passion fruit. Also available is beer, imported from the mainland, but the predominantly Muslim population of Lamu Town has granted only one restaurant a beer license.

As I relaxed in a elegantly carved wooden chair on the hotel balcony, I thought about how crucial trees have been in Lamu's history. Without the trees for building materials for homes, dhows, furniture, and tools, their life on these islands would have been impossible. The local cuisine relies heavily upon coconut, fruit juices, fish, and shellfish. While the fish and shellfish do not come directly from trees, they depend upon the nearby mangrove swamps for their existence. The donkeys, too, rely upon the trees for much-needed shade in the midday sun, and some of their food.

Before leaving the island, I went by the local Forestry Department office. The "experimental sea level nursery" had a few thousand tree seedlings. Most seedlings were growing in plastic sacks, but the mango seedlings were planted in 1-kg. (2.2 lb.) margarine tins. A clerk said that mango seedlings sell for 5 shillings (US\$ 0.30) each, lemon seedlings for 2 shillings (US\$ 0.13) each, and timber seedlings, such as Causurina sp., for 50 Kenyan cents (US\$ 0.03) each. While people plant fruit trees, and occasional timber trees, the mangroves remain the most important trees.

Although my visit just provided a brief glimpse of life in Lamu, past and present, it was a useful reminder of the wide variety of roles that trees play in African life. With current concerns over forest development to provide fuelwood and improve agricultural productivity, especially in the semi-arid and mountainous regions of Africa, we should not overlook the importance of management, development, and conservation of coastal mangrove swamps and other coastal forest resources. Mangroves, coconut palms, and other forest resources of the Lamu archipelago are central to the Swahili culture and degree of self-sufficiency that the Lamu people still maintain.

Sincerely,

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