Kenya Airways

Issue 23 May - July 1998

msafiri

The inflight magazine for Kenya Airways

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News Travel features Duty free Entertainment written by **Daniel Stiles** photographed by **Wendy Stone**

Lamu last city of the Swahili

The Swahili people originated because of rich natural resources and trade, but their socio-economic situation has changed so much since the 19th century that they are in danger of disappearing.

With a rich cultural and economic tradition, the Swahili are one of Africa's most ancient and distinguished peoples. Until a century ago, they dominated the rich Indian Ocean trading routes between East Africa and Arabia. But today their way of life is in danger of disappearing. The last city to maintain the traditional Swahili lifestyle and appearance is the Kenyan port of Lamu.

'Things are changing too fast. The old life is being lost because of too many tourists and too much 'siasa' – politics. It is 'mbaya sana', very bad.' The old man shakes his head and takes another sip of the strong Swahili coffee from the tiny ceramic cup. He pours me another cup from the peaked bronzed pot which looks like it belongs in an Arabian Nights story. The taste of ginger and cardamoms in the coffee is delicious. He offers me more sweet halwa.

Sheikh Omari Ahmad is sitting on the roof of his three-storey, 18th century coral stone house, under a woven palm-frond shelter. It is bright and hot, but a cooling sea breeze wafts across the flat roof. To the east, over some rooftops, lie the Cerulean Straits which separate Lamu Island from Manda Island. The wind against the strong sucking tide raises small white caps. A few small dhows chase them downwind, their lateen sails full and straining.

Omari is dressed in the traditional white gown, kanzu, and wears a Muslim kofia skullcap, embroidered skilfully with gold thread. He belongs to the Wa-ungwana, the patrician elite of Swahili society; oral traditions trace his ancestry back to the sultan Husain bin Ali, from Shiraz in present-day Iran. Legend has it that the sultan's seven sons left Shiraz 1,000 years ago to found the major Swahili trading cities along the East African coast – from Somalia to Mozambique and the Comoros Islands. It is said that Lamu is the oldest continuously inhabited town in Kenya.

Everything has to change. It is the way of the world. To see Lamu changing as it is, though, is sad. When I first visited this exotic town of 8,000 people in 1976, it was like miraculously entering a century long past. Sinbad the Sailor could have moored his dhow in Lamu's port. There were no motor vehicles, except for the district commissioner's Land Rover, which carried him the few hundred metres along the waterfront between home and office; and no television.

Often there was no electricity or running water either, but that was due to poor maintenance of existing facilities. There was one hotel bar that served alcohol, much detested by the pious local inhabitants. Only tourists and up-country functionaries posted to Lamu patronised it. The kohl-eyed Swahili women wore black bui-buis – satin shrouds that completely covered the head and body – and donkeys formed the only transport in the narrow lanes of the town.

Every morning at the painful hour of 4.30, and again at dawn, muezzins called the faithful to prayer from over 20 mosques. That and the cocks crowing and people yelling made sleeping late impossible.

Many things remain the same today – although the muezzins are louder now, thanks to their amplified loud-speakers. However, the skyline has been ruined by television aerials and cinderblock additions to the old houses, built on the roofs to cope with a growing population. Close to 12,000 people now live here. The town has spread out in a ragged sprawl onto the sand dunes beyond the 14th century pillar tomb which used to mark its limits.

The Swahili consider themselves a distinct people, with a culture different from that of the up-country Africans – although many Swahili cannot be distinguished physically from other Bantu Africans. They identify with southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf, though their language is a Bantu one. About 20 percent of the vocabulary comes from Arabic, but the grammar is entirely Bantu.

The Swahili people originated because of rich natural resources and trade, but their socio-economic situation has changed so much since the 19th century that this unique people and way of life are in danger of disappearing. Lamu, in fact, is the last city that maintains a traditional Swahili appearance and lifestyle, though even here it is in a corrupted form. The next most traditional, Zanzibar, is more cosmopolitan and strongly reflects its Omani and Indian heritage. The trade which stimulated the origin and development of the Swahili people and their civilisation simply no longer exists.

Sheikh Omari Ahmad's ancestors became rich through the trade they controlled from Lamu's port. The mainland forests produced a wealth of desired products, such as ivory, rhinoceros horn, leopard skins, ostrich feathers, timber, aromatic gums and resins, gum copal, wild rubber, amber, beeswax, and civet.

The sea yielded mother-of-pearl, tortoise shell, ambergris and bêche de ber – sea slugs highly prized by the Chinese for their supposed vitalising powers. Coastal mangroves provided the straight and hard boriti poles that were so important in the construction of Arabian and Persian houses in the deserts of the Middle East. Even today boriti are a main export from Lamu, but none of the other products is still traded internationally.

In exchange for the natural produce from the forests and sea, Omari's ancestors imported fine cloth, ceramics from China, India and western Asia, carved chests and carpets, iron tools and weapons, beads, grain and cooking oil, molasses, and spices. The Swahili ports were also transit stations for spices from Indonesia, and precious stones, silk, wildlife products, ceramics, lac dye – made from an insect – and indigo from India and China on their way to the Mediterranean.

Merchants came to the East African coast from the north and east during the northerly kaskazi winds that blow between October and March, and began their return journeys to Arabia, Persia, and India with the kusi monsoon of April to September. Until the 12th century, Indonesians sailed up the coast from the south, using Madagascar as a base. Today the Malagasy language is still an Indonesian one. The Swahili took Sofala in Mozambique from them in the 12th century, and thus gained control of the lucrative gold exports from the mines of Zimbabwe.

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3. Lamu Island Muslim women.

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2. 'Kofia' Muslim caps for sale at a roadside market.

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1. Lamu dhows in the Lamu Island Shela Dhow Race.

Muslim woman painting henna designs.

The first century AD *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, written by a Greek merchant, describes many pre-Islamic trading stations along the Azanian – that is, East African – coast. Thus we know that maritime trade has ancient roots.

It was not until Arabs from the Gulf settled in African villages and intermarried with the locals, however, that the Swahili civilisation began its development. Archaeological evidence suggests that this began in the eighth or ninth century. The earliest known coastal settlements are at Manda and Shanga, just opposite Lamu on Manda and Pate islands.

The Arab geographers al-Masudi, al-Idrisi and Ibn Battuta, writing between 940 and 1330 AD, described the Zinj coast, as it was now called, as one of the pagan African and Muslim Arab admixture. Over time, the Swahili became completely Muslim and developed their own unique styles of architecture and poetry.

When Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope and sailed up the East African coast in 1498, he was most impressed with the Swahili city-states of Kilwa, Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu. They boasted decorated palaces, great mosques and multi-storeyed houses, and the Swahili sultans minted their own coins.

The Portuguese were later to conquer these and other Swahili towns, but they were constantly at war in one place or another trying to keep them under control. The Sultan of Oman, allied to the Swahili, finally defeated the Portuguese at Fort Jesus in Mombasa in 1698, sounding the death knell for their power in equatorial East Africa.

Through all this, Omari's family survived by making and changing alliances as the situation demanded. The politics of the Swahili coast between the 12th and 19th centuries closely resembled those of the ancient Greek city-states. All were constantly jockeying for power in order to control land, people and resources so as to enrich themselves.

Today, control of resources is largely centred in Nairobi with the national government. The Swahili have little say in how they are used or managed. The dhow ports are silent and deserted except for the occasional coaster. Swahili jahazis and mashuas – small fishing and transport boats – are still common in Lamu and Zanzibar, but the large ocean-going vessels are gone from Zinj. In the early 1970s, some 300 dhows came to Lamu and more than 500 to Mombasa each year from abroad. Now there are none – although sailing booms, sambuks, zarooks, kotias, manjis and others still ply the seas of Arabia and India.

Thanking Omari for the coffee, I take my leave. It is late afternoon, and there is still time to take a stroll and enjoy what is left of the traditional Swahili town. Lamu is divided into two main parts: the stone northern section, called Mkomani where Omari and the other Wa-ungwana lived; and the southern part, which consists of mud and thatch huts and is called Langoni. But now Gardeni to the west, on the sand dunes, is also becoming important as an area of modern cinderblock expansion.

A narrow lane flanked by an open gutter descends to the Usita wa Mui - the main street. It is filled with bui-buis clad women and their children, out shopping after the midday rest. Donkeys piled high with cement bags and sand, heading for the construction sites in Gardeni, dodge past wooden pushcarts laden with crates of soft drinks. The aromas of coffee, incense, spices and roasting meat waft out of the open shops and cafés lining the street. Indian and Arabic music lilt through the air. The street finally opens into a large square in front of the old fort – now a museum – shaded by fig and mango trees, under which old men play draughts with bottle caps.

From down by the waterfront, only about 30 metres away, come the sounds of drums beating and women singing. A motor launch has arrived, probably from Pate or Faza, bringing people for tonight's Maulidi celebrations. They are what have brought me to Lamu. Once a year, the people celebrate in grand style the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed, the Maulidi al Nebi. The festivities go on for several days, and involve dancing, prayers, and processions by the entire town. People arrive for them by dhow, launch and aeroplane from all over East Africa, and even from Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen and Pakistan.

'Jambo, habari gani?' I am greeted by Katana Jimbi, an old friend who is in charge of the Fort Museum. This is a lucky break. I ask Katana if he has some spare time to watch the dances with me: I have always wanted someone knowledgeable to explain them. Omari can't do it because he has to participate in the dances himself.

'Sure, I have a bit of time,' Katana replies amiably. He is a Giriama, a tribe which lives further south along the coast of the mainland, and he is dedicated to the preservation of the many Swahili ruins that are in danger of destruction by encroaching vegetation and farmers. There are ancient towns, mosques and tombs all along the Kenyan coast which are in need of attention if they are not to disappear. Katana has overseen the restoration of the old fort, which had been a rundown prison, into an impressive museum and restaurant.

The dances take place in a large sandy open area in front of the Riyadha mosque. People are thronging in from all over town. The feet and hands of many of the women are beautifully decorated with intricate designs in red henna, and when they coyly let the bui-bui satin drop from their faces it is possible to see that they are wearing their fine gold earrings, nosestuds and make-up. Maulidi is like Christmas for the people of Lamu: a time to celebrate.

Large rectangular areas are roped off, each containing the representatives of a different village from the islands of the Lamu archipelago. On the far side, the women are restricted to one roped-off area from which men are excluded. Lines of men stand in straight rows, all wearing spotlessly white kanzus and kofias, and all holding up wooden sticks with curved handles in front of their faces as if on military inspection. And they are. Older men wearing sunglasses walk along the line straightening the sticks and smoothing out the kanzus, whispering encouragement to their men for what is to follow.

Eventually the drums and tambourines start to beat, and the rows of men sway and chant. Champions take up long, curved swords and dance into the ring. Two men face off and begin to jump and whirl, swinging their swords at each other in mock combat to the beat of the drums. The crowd roars its approval at particularly good moves.

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4. The seafront of Lamu town.

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5. A Muslim cultural stick-dancing ceremony.

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6. The Maulidi Festival at Riyadha Mosque Square.

'This dance is called the Chama,' shouts Katana over the din. 'The older man is from Matandoni and he is considered as the best Chama dancer on Lamu. The younger man is from Pate and he is challenging. The men in lines are doing the Goma, which is a completely different style of dance, requiring discipline and control, rather than the acrobatics of the Chama.'

In another of the partitioned areas, two younger men begin to go at each other with 125 centimetre long sticks. They swing as hard as they can, while dancing around in a circle. Their sticks meet with resounding clacks. Each man stays in the ring only a minute or two, and is then replaced by another from the surrounding crowd. Some of them swing with great ferocity, and things seem on the verge of getting out of control.

'That's the Kirumbizi', says Katana. 'Men dance it to take out their frustrations on one another, rather than getting into real fights. It's a good system, and keeps down serious fighting and injury. They only aim to hit the sticks – not each other.'

It is dusk now, and the area in front of the mosque is packed with people. Dust, kicked up by the dancing and by the shuffling throng, swirls through the air. Many of the men in the Goma lines now have Kenyan shilling notes sticking out of their kofias, given by onlookers in appreciation for their skilful dancing.

'You see those older men in the joho robes sitting in front of the mosque?' asks Katana. He points out a group of dignified elders wearing beautifully embroidered ceremonial robes and turbans. They are sitting in a row, and people are coming up in a continuous line to kiss their hands and receive a few words of blessing.

'They are Sherifs, descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. They are very revered and learned men. They have come from the Sudan, Egypt and Arabia to pay their respects to Al-Habib Salih. He was the man who started the Maulidi celebrations in their current form, about 80 years ago. He came to Lamu from the Comoros and started a religious college. He introduced music and dancing to Islamic celebrations, which at first was considered profane. Later, it was accepted – as you can see.' Katana smiles. 'Tomorrow, a ceremony will be held at Al-Habib Salih's grave.'

After watching another hour of dancing, and seeing another dance called the Uta – in which men dance with leg rattles – Katana says he has to return to his wife and family. I go to my favourite restaurant along the waterfront – just a simple banda with palm-frond walls and roof – and order some fresh red snapper, which is grilled over a charcoal fire while being basted in a mixture of lemon juice and coconut milk.

During the meal, a Vugo procession passes by, making quite a racket. Women hold up cowhorns and beat them with sticks, while men play the zumari – a nasal sounding reed horn. The restaurant is filled with tourists, mostly young backpackers who are staying in one of the many cheap hotels in the old town.

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HAKUNAMATATA

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7. Traditional crafted dhow building in Matandoni village on Lamu Island.

8. Shela Beach on Lamu Island fronted by the Indian Ocean.

9. Hakunamatata – 'no problem' in Swahili – carved on the side of a traditional dhow.

I am renting a traditional style Lamu house owned by an English expatriate. Many of the old houses have been bought by foreigners and restored. The local people, whether out of poverty or indifference, have been letting the 18th and 19th century Swahili houses decay into ruins. Even with the efforts of the National Museum to conserve its appearance, it is difficult to know whether Lamu will survive. An elaborate town plan, formulated with United Nations' assistance, has been largely ignored by town leaders.

The next morning, at dawn, I set off on foot for Shela, a quaint village perched on a hill overlooking the southern entrance to the straights separating Lamu and Manda islands. There is no permanent path for the entire five kilometre distance, as the high tide covers the lower parts of the walk twice daily. But it is now low tide, so there is no trouble. Palm trees, mangroves and flat-topped acacias offer shade along the way. Even the early morning sun is strong here at sea level, only two degrees south of the Equator.

The route passes Hidabu Hill, a huge sand dune under which *The Lamu Chronicle* says the original town was first situated. One can always find bits of blue Chinese ceramics, yellow and black pieces from Persia, and local reddish pottery sherds eroding from the sands. Sometimes glass and bones can also be seen. Shela, gleaming white and blue on its promontory like a fairy kingdom, is an exciting sight. Beached dhows lie like sleeping whales along the curving waterfront, and fishermen sit in their shade repairing sails and nets. We greet one another with hails of 'Jambo' and 'Habari – mzuri sana'.

Stretching endlessly south from the Peponi Hotel is a flat, wide and white beach – one of the finest in Kenya. A gigantic chain of sand dunes rise behind it, with small pockets of stunted doum palms offering shade in the occasional hollow. The hollows also provide hiding places for the dune thieves, as they are called. One has to be very careful with personal effects along this beach, as boys can run out from the dunes and snatch things while tourists are swimming or walking. Crime, sadly, is becoming a big problem on Lamu.

After a long walk and swim, the wind strengthens and starts to blow grains of sand into my skin like tiny darts. Approaching the Peponi, some local Bajunis run up and offer a dhow ride back to Lamu. They wear torn T-shirts and wide-brimmed straw hats. One has to check that their dhows aren't flying the skull and crossbones, they look so much like pirates. The Bajuni are part of the Swahili world, but specialise in fishing and farming rather than trading. They have a strong Somali admixture, and many used to live in southern Somalia and its offshore islands before the political troubles there. Most have now moved to Kenya.

Since the tide is rising and the sun searing, a dhow ride seems like a good idea. After negotiating a price, I wade out and jump into the nine-metre craft to join three European tourists. This type of dhow, called a jahazi, is built in the village of Matandoni on the other side of the island. Craftsmen there still construct boats using the same methods and tools as 500 years ago.

The single crewman pulls on a thick rope and hoists the heavy cotton sheet and boom of the lateen sail, while the captain steers with the rickety tiller into a reach heading north towards Lamu town. Manda, only 300 metres away to the east, looks like a deserted island covered with a thick mat of thorn bush. Indeed only a few people do live on the island because of a lack of water. Many of the people of Shela are descendants of the former population of Takwa, now an abandoned ruin on Manda.

The wind continues to rise, and the dhow bucks and sways dangerously through the heavy chop. The crewman hands out tin cans, and all of us bail water furiously as it seeps through the creaking floorboards. As the dhow crashes through the water, it is astounding it doesn't disintegrate under the strain. The Shela-Lamu trip is made in what seems like record time, and by its end we are all soaked through and laughing.

From the streets, numerous processions are converging on the tomb of Al-Habib Salih, which is on the southern edge of town. People beat drums and tambourines, and flags and palm branches wave in the air. A tide of glistening black sweeping up the waterfront signals the female contingent. It looks like a medieval army going to war.

I am hot and sunburned, but nevertheless hurry back to my 18th century whitewashed coral house to fetch my camera. Lamu still is a place like no other....

FACT FILE

Daniel Stiles was trained in the USA and France as an archaeologist and anthropologist, obtaining his Ph.D. in 1981. He has taught at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the universities of Nairobi, Paris X and Oxford. He has also worked for the UN Environment Programme, UNDP and UNICEF, and he continues to carry out anthropological research related to environmental issues while travelling extensively. He is based in Nairobi, Kenya.