Discovery

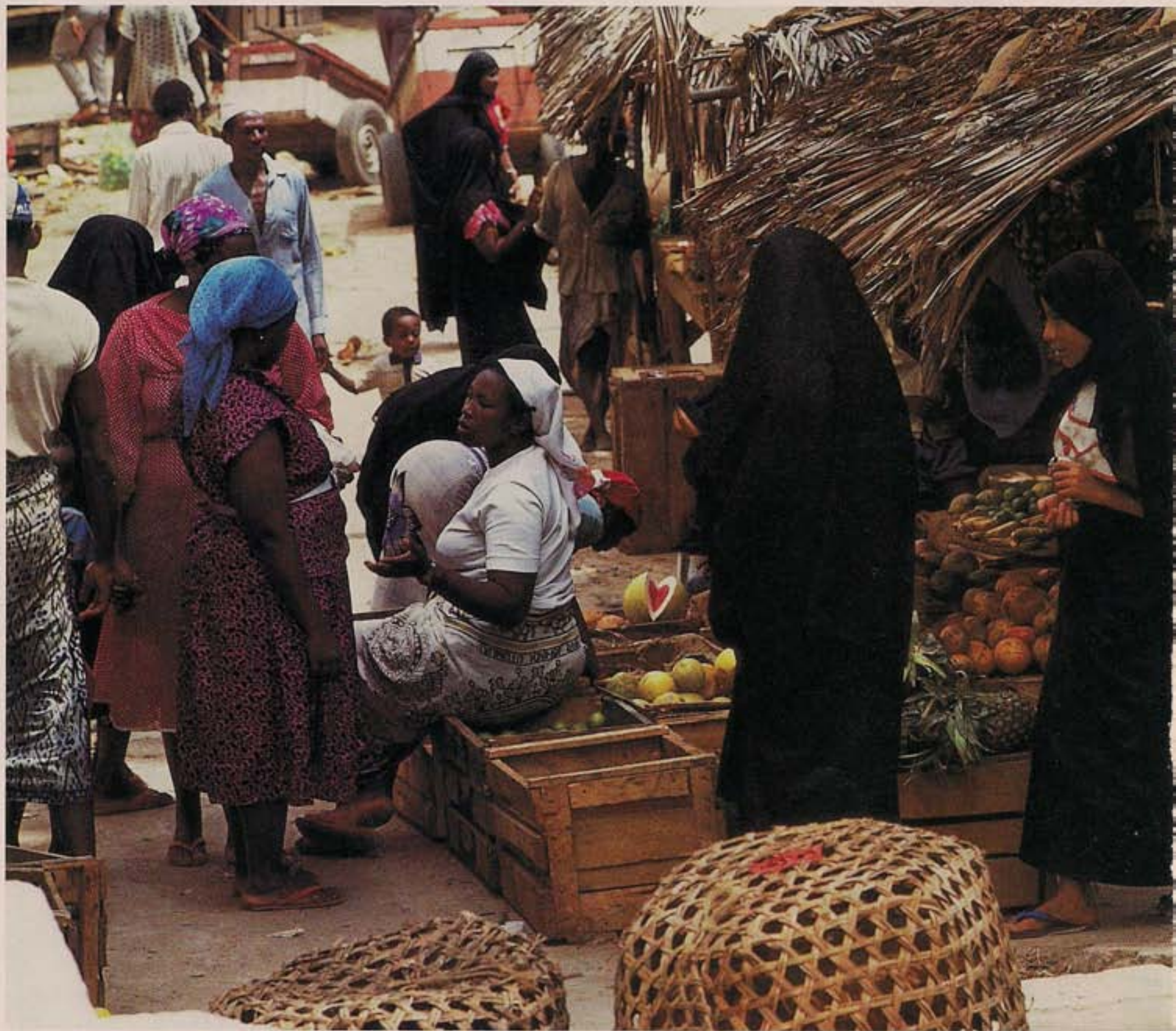
A Swahili Port of Call

by Daniel Stiles

"Things are changing too fast, Bwana Danieli. The old life is being lost because of too many tourists and too much politics," lamented Sheik Omari Ahmad. We were sipping coffee on the roof of his eighteenth-century coral-stone house in Lamu, the port town of Lamu Island off the coast of Kenya. To the east, over some rooftops, I could glimpse a few small dhows—their lateen sails full and straining—chasing whitecaps in a cerulean sea. Omari belongs to the patrician elite of Swahili society, that synthesis of African and Arabian culture that evolved on Africa's east coast, from Somalia to Mozambique and the Comoros Islands. Omari traces his ancestry to Sultan Husain bin Ali of Shiraz, in Persia (now Iran). Legend has it that the sultan's seven sons left Shiraz a thousand years ago to found the major Swahili trading cities.

"Everything has to change," I replied lamely. "It's the way of the world."

When I first visited Lamu (population 8,000) in 1976, I thought that I had miraculously entered a century long past—I was sure that Sinbad the Sailor had moored his dhow in the port. Donkeys carried loads through the town's narrow lanes. The only motor vehicle was the district commissioner's Land-Rover, which carried him the few hundred yards along the waterfront between his home and office. There was no television. Often there was no electricity or running water due to the poor



Merchants and buyers from various cultural backgrounds mingle in a Lamu Island marketplace.

All photographs by Wendy Stone; Gamma Liaison

maintenance of existing facilities. The Swahili women were veiled head to toe in black satin, revealing only their eyes, lined with kohl. Every morning at about 4:30 and again at dawn, muezzins called the Muslim faithful to prayer from more than twenty mosques. That and the cocks crowing and people shouting made sleeping late impossible.

Many things were the same today (the muezzins with their amplified loudspeakers were even louder). But now the skyline was pierced by television aerials and by nontraditional house additions, built on the roofs to cope with a growing population of about 12,000. The town has begun to sprawl onto the sand dunes beyond the fourteenth-century pillar tomb that used to mark the town limits. And while in the past, nothing seemed to perturb the tranquil people, not even water and power cuts, now Muslim fundamentalism and recently introduced multiparty democracy in Kenya were stirring up emotions.

The IPK, the banned Islamic Party of Kenya, was trying to gain power with Muslims and politicize the Swahili. Coastal Muslims had long felt that they were being forgotten by the largely Christian national government in Nairobi. They wanted more recognition and more say in their own affairs. A movement had started in Kenya to create a federal system with a number of semiautonomous states. The Swahili, together with other minority ethnic groups, were its strongest supporters.

Identifying with southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf, the Swahili consider themselves a distinct people, with a culture different from that of the upcountry Africans. But many Swahili cannot be distinguished physically from their neighbors, and even though about 20 percent of their vocabulary comes from Arabic, their grammar is entirely Bantu. Yet many of the elite look partly or entirely like Arabs, and some families still have links with Yemen or Oman. In fact, many Swahili do not even want to be called Swahili and prefer to be called either Shirazi, indicating a Gulf origin, or Arab. This has added to the tension between the coastal people and hinterland Africans.

Swahili history is tied to the region's natural resources and trade. The mainland forests produced a wealth of desired products, such as ivory, rhinoceros horns, 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-mer*, the sea slug prized by the Chinese for its vitalizing powers. Coastal mangroves provided the straight, hard poles that were so important in the construction of Arabian and Persian houses in the deserts of the Middle East. Even today mangrove poles are a main export from Lamu, but the other products are no longer traded.

Sheikh Omari Ahmad's ancestors became rich through the export trade they controlled from Lamu's port. In exchange, they imported fine cloth, ceramics, carved chests, carpets, iron tools and weapons, beads, grain, cooking oil, molasses, and spices from China, India, and western Asia. The Swahili ports were also conduits for spices from Indonesia, and precious stones, silk, wildlife products, ceramics, lac (a shellac), and indigo from India and China on their way to the Mediterranean. Between October and March, merchants came to the East African coast from the north and east with the northern *kaskazi* winds. The journey back to Arabia, Persia, and India began with the *kusi* monsoon between April and September. Until the twelfth century, Indonesians sailed up the coast from the south, using Madagascar as a base. The Swahili took Sofala in Mozambique from them in the twelfth century, gaining control of the lucrative gold exports from the mines in what is now Zimbabwe.

Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, a geographical work written by an anonymous Greek merchant in the first century A.D., describes many pre-Islamic trading stations along the East African coast; thus we know that the maritime trade had ancient roots. Over the centuries, the Swahili civilization developed as the Arabian and African peoples interacted, particularly after the founding of Islam. Archeological evidence suggests that this started in the eighth or ninth century. The earliest coastal settlements known are at Manda and Shanga, just opposite Lamu, on Pate and Manda Islands. The Arab geographers al-Masudi, al-Idrisi, and Ibn Battuta, writing between the tenth and fourteenth centuries A.D., described the population of the Zinj coast, as it was then called, as a combination of pagan African and Muslim Arab. Over time the Swahili became completely Muslim and developed their own unique style of architecture and poetry.

When 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. There were decorated palaces, great mosques, and multistoried 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 the populace under control. The sultan of Oman, allied with the Swahili, finally defeated the Portuguese at Fort Jesus in Mombasa in 1698, sounding the death knell for Portuguese power in East Africa.

Through all of this, Omari's ancestors survived by making and changing alliances as the situation demanded. With constant jockeying for power to control land, people, and resources, the politics of the Swahili coast between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries resembled those of the ancient Greek city-states.

Lamu remains the most traditional Swahili city in appearance and life style. The next most traditional, Zanzibar, is more cosmopolitan and strongly reflects its Omani and Indian heritage. But the trade that stimulated the development of the Swahili civilization no longer exists. Today control of resources is largely centered in Nairobi with the national government. Major imports are now vehicles, machinery, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and food (Kenya does not produce enough food to feed itself). Exports are not the natural forest and marine products of the Swahili but coffee, tea, and other upcountry agricultural products.

The dhow ports are nearly deserted, except for the occasional vessel that follows the coast making port calls. Swahili jahazis and mashuas—small fishing and transport boats—are still common in Lamu and Zanzibar, but the large oceangoing vessels are gone. In the early 1970s some 300 dhows came to Lamu each year from abroad. Now there are none, although sailing booms, sambuks, zarooks, katias, manjis, and other vessels still ply the seas of Arabia and India.

I thanked Omari for the coffee and took my leave. It was late afternoon, and I wanted to stroll through town before the start of the night's festivities. Once a year the people celebrate the Maulidi al Nebi, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, in grand style. The dancing, prayers, and processions last for several days. People come by dhow, launch, and airplane from all over East Africa, and even from Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, and Pakistan. That is why I, too, had come.

Lamu is divided into two main parts, the stone northern section where Omari and the other elite live and the southern section, with mud and thatch huts occupied by the bulk of the population. But now the area to the west, on the sand dunes, is being expanded with modern cinder block. I descended a narrow lane bordered by an open gutter until I reached the main street. It was filled with veiled women and their children out shopping after the midday rest. I had to dodge donkeys carrying cement bags and sand bound for construction sites in the west end, and wooden pushcarts laden with crates of soft drinks. The smells of coffee, incense, spices, and roasting meat came from the open shops and cafés lining the street. Indian and Arabic music lilted through the air.

I came to the large square in front of the old fort—now a museum—and watched some old men playing checkers with bottle caps in the shade of fig and mango trees. Then I heard drums beating and women singing down by the waterfront, only about a hundred feet away. A motor launch had arrived, probably from Pate or Faza, bringing people for the night's Maulidi celebrations.

My name was called, and I turned and saw Katana Jimbi, an old friend who was in charge of the fort museum. This was a lucky break. I asked if he had some spare time to watch the dances with me. I had always wanted someone who could explain them to accompany me. Omari couldn't because he was going to participate in the dances.

"Sure, I have a bit of time," Katana replied amiably. Katana was a Giriama, a member of a tribe that lived along the coast farther south on the mainland. He was dedicated to the preservation of the many Swahili ruins that were in danger of destruction by encroaching vegetation and agriculture. Ancient towns, mosques, and tombs all along the Kenyan coast needed attention if they weren't to disappear. Katana had overseen the restoration of the old fort, which had been a rundown prison when I first went to Lamu. Now it was a lovely museum and restaurant.

We joined others converging on the Riyadha Mosque, in front of which the dances were to take place in a sandy, open area. The feet and hands of many of the women were beautifully decorated with intricate designs in red henna, and when they coyly let drop the satin veils from their faces I could see that they were wearing their finest gold earrings, nose studs, and makeup. Maulidi was like Christmas: it was a time to celebrate.

Large rectangular areas were roped off, each containing the representatives of different villages from the islands of the archipelago. On the far side the women

A dhow race off the village of Shela on Lamu Island

were restricted to one roped-off area from which men were excluded. Older men, dressed in white and holding up sticks with curved handles, stood in straight rows like soldiers awaiting inspection. Others wearing sunglasses walked along the lines, straightening the sticks, smoothing out the men's gowns, and whispering encouragement.

Eventually the drums and tambourines started to sound, and the rows of men swayed and chanted. Champions took up long, curved swords and danced into the ring. Two men faced off and began to jump and whirl, swinging their swords at each other in mock combat to the beat of the drums. The crowd roared its approval at particularly good moves.

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

In another partitioned area, two younger men began to go at each other with four-foot-long sticks. They swung as hard as they could while dancing in a circle, their sticks meeting with resounding clacks. Each man stayed in the ring only a minute or two and then was replaced by another from the surrounding crowd. Some swung with real ferocity, and I hoped that things wouldn't get out of hand.

"That's the Kirumbizi," said Katana, seeing my gaze go over to where the dance was being performed. "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 aim to hit only the sticks, not each other."

It was dusk now, and the area in front of the Riyadha Mosque was packed with people. Dust swirled through the air from the dancing and the shuffling throng. Many of the men in the Goma lines now had Kenyan shilling notes, given to them by appreciative onlookers, sticking out from their skullcaps.

"You see those older men in the robes sitting in front of the mosque?" asked Katana.

I looked over and saw a group of digni-

Exploring Lamu

Lamu Museum is a good starting point for a tour of the city's "Stone Town" section, where houses and hotels face the water's edge. The museum is part of the National Museums of Kenya; its renovation, which began in the 1980s, was organized by Richard Leakey, then director of the national system. Located on Kenyatta Road, the museum features informative exhibits on Swahili culture, manages a restored eighteenth-century Swahili house, and sponsors archeological excavations on Pate, a nearby island with a Swahili heritage. The museum also plays a central role in preserving old Lamu—including the repair of the sea wall.

To get more of a feel for Lamu's past, one can walk to the village of Matondoni, where boatwrights still gather jungle crook, the naturally curved limbs of mangroves, to build dhow hulls. An easy trip by dhow over to Manda Island takes you to the ruins of Takwa, near Ras Kitau. There is also a daily boat ride to Siyu, a small fishing village where a well-preserved fort boasts Omani-style walls.

The best time to visit Lamu is either between December and March or from July to October, and the best way to get there is by small plane, with regularly scheduled flights from Nairobi or the coastal town of Malindi. Airplanes land on Manda Island, and ferries take you from there to Lamu. (You can also approach the archipelago by taking a bus along the coast, from Mombasa or Malindi; but the ride is uncomfortable and there is some risk of being confronted by Somali bandits.) Lamu itself is safe, and accommodations can be had in the various hotels and guest houses in Lamu city or in the nearby beachside village of Shela. The archipelago—long a winter holiday destination for the well-heeled—also has its share of luxury resorts.

Books and pamphlets on Swahili culture are readily available at Lamu Museum and in local bookstores. To read up on the subject in the United States, Daniel Stiles recommends *East Africa and the Orient: Cultural Syntheses in Pre-Colonial Times*, edited by H. Neville Chittick and Robert I. Rotberg (Holmes and Meier, 1975).

fied elders wearing beautifully embroidered ceremonial robes and turbans. They sat in a row, and people came up in a continuous line to kiss their hands and receive a few words of blessing.

"They are sherifs, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. 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 started the Maulidi celebrations in their current form about eighty 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 smiled. "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, I said goodbye to Katana and went to my favorite restaurant along the waterfront, just a simple hut with palm-frond walls and roof. It was filled with tourists, mostly young backpackers who stayed in the many cheap hotels of the old town. I was renting a traditional Lamu house owned by an English expatriate. Many of the old houses had been bought by foreigners and restored. The local people, whether out of poverty or indifference, were letting the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Swahili houses decay into ruins. While I was eating, a noisy procession went by. Women held up cow horns and beat them with sticks; men played nasal-sounding reed horns.

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 straits separating Lamu and Manda Islands. There was no permanent path for the entire three-mile distance, as high tide covered the lower parts of the walk twice daily. It was now low tide, so I would have no trouble. Palm trees, mangroves, and flat-topped acacias offered shade along the way. Even the early morning sun was strong here at sea level, only two degrees south of the equator.

I passed a huge sand dune that marked the original site of the town. One could always find bits of blue Chinese ceramics, yellow-and-black pieces from Persia, and local reddish pottery shards eroding out of the sands. Sometimes glass and bones could also be seen. Farther along, the gleaming white-and-blue village of Shela on its promontory gave the appearance of a fairy kingdom. Beached dhows lay along the curving waterfront, and fishermen sat in their shade repairing sails and nets.

Two men perform the Kirumbizi stick dance. Music and dance were considered profane when they were introduced about eighty years ago, but are now major features of Maulidi, the celebration of Muhammad's birthday.

I was heading for the beach, which stretched endlessly south from the Peponi Hotel. The beach was flat, wide, and white, one of the finest in Kenya. A chain of gigantic sand dunes rose in back of it, with small pockets of stunted doum palms offering shade in the occasional hollow. The hollows also offered a hiding place for the "dune thieves," boys who could run out and snatch things while tourists were swimming or walking.

After a long walk and swim, I decided to return, as the wind had strengthened and was blowing bits of sand into my skin like tiny darts. As I approached the hotel some local fishermen ran up offering me a dhow ride back to Lamu. They wore torn T-shirts and wide-brimmed straw hats. These were Bajunis, Swahilis specializing in fishing and farming. Many used to live in southern Somalia and the offshore islands before the political troubles there.

Since the tide was rising, and the sun searing, I decided to accept the ride, and after negotiating the price, I waded out and joined three tourists in the twenty-five-foot-long craft. This type of dhow, called a jahazi, was built in the village of Matondoni on the other side of the island, using the same methods and tools used five hundred years ago. The one crew member pulled on a thick rope and hoisted the heavy boom and cotton sheet of the lateen sail, while the captain steered into a reach that took us north toward Lamu town. Manda, only 300 yards to the east and covered with thorn bush, looked deserted. Actually, few people lived on the island because of a lack of water.

The wind continued to rise and the dhow bucked and swayed dangerously through the heavy chop. The crewman gave tin cans to all of us and we bailed furiously as water seeped through the creaking floorboards. The dhow crashed through the water, and I was amazed that it didn't disintegrate from the strain. I think we made the trip from Shela in record time, and all of us were soaked through and laughing when we reached Lamu. □

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