Introduction to the Lamu Archipelago

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The Lamu Archipelago lies off the coast of Kenya and consists of the three main islands of Lamu, Manda, and Pate. Historically, the archipelago formed part of the ¿Swahili™ corridor” a series of coastal settlements stretching from southern Mozambique to Mogadishu in Somalia. This corridor functioned as a gateway between the African continent and lands that lay beyond the Western Indian Ocean, such as Arabia and India. East Africa™s coastal inhabitants are generally referred to as the ¿Swahili™, but this term is contested in scholarly literature and by local inhabitants because it does not entirely reflect the true complexity of the situation. Historically, the coastal peoples were never united politically. However, it is likely that they shared religious beliefs, Islam being a major one, but expressed variously in different locations. They also are likely to have spoken a common language, Kiswahili, again with local variations. Many settlements also had general access to a sea-borne mercantile economy. However, these settlements varied in size and form. A number of them had mixed economies of agriculture and trade. Coastal peoples also had varying relations with other local groups as well as with those who came from across the ocean. Certainly, the fortunes of coastal settlements arose and fell over time, owing as much to internal strife and competition for resources, as to external pressures of conquest and economic demand for their goods and services.

Lamu Town, situated on Lamu Island, has long been recognised as a unique example of a ¿Swahili™ settlement. Local histories such as the Lamu Chronicle narrate that Lamu™s first settlers came from the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century. However, archaeological evidence gathered from Shanga, an island off Pate, indicates that the archipelago has been occupied only since the eighth or ninth century. Settlements with complex urban-style residential patterns (closely built domestic dwellings with streets), predicated on local, regional, and international commercial relations are present throughout the archipelago and date from at least the 14th century. Historical remains of settlements on Pate, dating from around the 16th century, and the settlement at Takwa on Manda, dating from around the 17th century, provide some evidence of such forms of urbanisation. Excavations carried out at Takwa show evidence of streets that run outward from a central mosque with its distinctive pillar, as well as many stone-built houses with decorative wall niches, a number featuring bathrooms, stores, and small courtyards.

Lamu Town came into its own in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1812, Lamu™s inhabitants fought and won a battle against their rivals from Pate and Mombasa at Shela, a small town about 2 km south of Lamu Town. The Omani Sultans who had long-standing relations with coastal East Africa supported Lamu™s inhabitants in their efforts. The Omanis went on to establish their capital at Zanzibar in 1840 and came to dominate the region until European powers began their expansion in Africa. Architectural evidence suggests that in the period following the conflict at Shela, Shela and Lamu underwent growth and expansion.
The Friday Mosque of Shela likely dates from this period. It covers an area of 290 square metres and its elaborate plasterwork mihrab (prayer niche) dates to AH 1245/1829 CE. The mosque has a minaret towering 18 metres high with an internal staircase, probably the only such pre-20th-century minaret in the region.

Construction of the Lamu Fort began sometime after 1812 and was completed in 1821. The fort is situated in front of Lamu’s main square and market. The building is a multistory square structure with an internal open courtyard. A centrally located doorway provides access to the interior of the building. Each side of the building measures around 40 metres with round bastions situated on the northwest and southeast corners. The fort has been used to house a garrison of soldiers and served as a prison beginning with the British colonisation of the region in the 1900s. Lamu Fort presently serves as a museum and cultural centre.

The building currently housing the Swahili House Museum represents the apogee of 19th-century stone-built residential architecture. The house was completed in 1892 and is closely linked to Abdulla bin Hemed bin Said al-Busaidi, a kinsman of the Sultan of Oman. The two-story house has a stone arcade veranda on the ground floor that supports a second-floor balcony made of teak. The interior of the house is built around an open courtyard (kiwanda) and contains many decorative features, including walls plastered with rows of niches (zidaka). It should be noted that many of Lamu’s residents lived in buildings made of more modest materials and sizes, including houses made of mud and wattle with thatched roofs.

In 2001, UNESCO designated Lamu as a World Heritage Site. The three criteria it used to bestow this designation summarise the cultural significance of Lamu.

1. The architecture and urban structure of Lamu graphically demonstrate the cultural influences on this area during several hundred years, including those of Europe, Arabia, and India, and how traditional Swahili techniques were incorporated with these influences to produce a distinct culture.

2. The growth and decline of the seaports on the East African coast and interaction between the Bantu, Arabs, Persians, Indians, and Europeans represent significant cultural and economic phases in the history of the region, which finds its most outstanding expression in Lamu Old Town.

3. Its paramount trading role and its attraction for scholars and teachers gave Lamu an important religious function in the region. It continues to be a significant centre for education in Islamic and Swahili culture.

Lamu’s continued vibrancy as a historic regional centre comes to the fore during the annual celebration of the Prophet Mohammed’s birthday (Maulidi), established by Habib Saleh (d. 1935), a religious teacher of Hadrami-Comoran background who is also credited with establishing the Riyadah Mosque-College in 1901. At Maulidi, hundreds of
people travel to Lamu from all over the world to either first experience or reacquaint themselves with Lamu and its heritage.

Resources of Interest


