

Ancient Arab settlements of the Swahili coast

An introduction to East Africa's *Shirazi* and *Omani* monuments



Mid-19th century Omani residences in Kilwa Kivinje, Tanzania, with original carved doors, balconies and window shutters



Residence in Kilwa Kivinje, Tanzania



High court of justice, Stone Town, Zanzibar

Often overlooked by visitors to East Africa, the coastal areas of southern Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and northern Mozambique boast several ruined and extant historical towns of significant cultural importance. Although some receive an increasing number of visitors - especially Stone Town in Zanzibar and Lamu in Kenya - most sites seldom see a single soul. Places like Kilwa and Pemba in Tanzania are notable for their remote and isolated location, whilst the city of Mogadishu has been a no go area for years due to the ongoing Somali civil war. This brief introduction to East Africa's *Shirazi* and *Omani* structures intends to make a broader public familiar with the presence of world class, African monuments in a part of the continent for which it's early history is commonly only associated with colonial influence.

History

The first Swahili settlements were constructed more than a millennium ago, when Bantu and Cushitic speaking Africans settled along the coast. These Africans are believed to have attained a common cultural tradition and linguistic base, hence becoming *Swahili* through the medium of Islam. The early Swahili people were known as *Shirazi*, on the virtue of their association with Shirazi Islam which spread out from Shiraz, Persia.

The Swahili coast has had trading links with the rest of the world for millennia. Most notably, trade between the East Africa and the Persian gulf was well established by AD 1000. The reliability of the monsoon winds - changing regularly twice a year, allowing ships to cross the ocean and return again within twelve months - was a crucial factor in the early development of the Indian Ocean trading network. As a result, powerful Shirazi city states



Great Mosque, Kilwa Kisiwani. 13th (right part) and 14th century (left part). In medieval times Kilwa ('Quiloa' on old maps) was East Africa's most important settlement



Mihrab of Great Mosque (15th century), Kilwa Kisiwani



Great Mosque from the south west, Kilwa Kisiwani, with recently restored domes

sprung up between 13th and 15th century, most of them in modern day Tanzania.

From 1498 the first Portuguese galleons started sailing the Indian Ocean and the growth of the Swahili civilization came to an abrupt end. Portuguese dominance emerged in the 17th century in the form of a new dynasty of Arab rulers from Oman. The *Omani* took over the Swahili coast and established trade routes and settlements as far as Lake Tanganyika and further. In 1841 the Sultan of Oman decided to move the Omani capital from Muscat to Zanzibar. This situation lasted until the independence of Zanzibar in 1862. Omani influence in East Africa declined as the European 'scramble for Africa' increased, finally resulting in the Treaty of Berlin (1885) that regulated European colonization and trade in Africa.

Distribution

Since the trade in ivory, slaves and Zimbabwean gold flourished for centuries, Arab merchants were able to establish settlements all along the East African coast. Many of these once celebrated busy ports, attracting merchants and scholars from far off lands, nowadays are run down and returning to their fishing village roots. Many historic buildings have disintegrated and fallen to ruins.

Ancient Swahili settlements can be found in the coastal areas and islands of southern Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and northern Mozambique as well as on the offshore islands of northern Madagascar and the Comoro archipelago. These southern frontiers are determined by the trading range the sailing vessels were allowed by the monsoon winds.

Ancient Swahili settlements are rarely found more than a few kilometers from the Indian ocean since they heavily relied upon marine resources.

Architecture

The climate and the virtue of modesty extolled by the Qur'an determine the logic behind traditional Swahili architecture. In urban settings houses have always been built in tightly packed huddles



Omani court house with colonial era clock tower, Chake Chake, Pemba, Tanzania. Its impressive carved door is displayed in the carved doors section.



Palace in Stone Town, Zanzibar with carved door, wooden window shutters and castellated battlements



Graveyard dating back to the 17th century, Msasani, Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania

accessed by narrow alleyways, keeping the heat and glare at bay.

Arabic buildings are often square, with two or three stories and flat roofs. Beyond the majestic doors (see: carved doors section) buildings looked inwards on to a cool courtyard, surrounded by a series of narrow inner galleries, culminating in the most private space, the *ndani*. The width of each gallery is determined by the width of the ceiling beams; if cut square from mangrove wood and colored red, black, and white, they are called *bana'a*. If the natural shape and color of the wood is kept, the beams are called *boriti*. This unique architectural design is often complimented with delicate plasterwork, and intricately carved wall niches called *vidaka*.

External balconies, essential for keeping houses cool, were covered with intricately carved wooden filigree screens called *uzio*, shielding the occupants from public view. Windows did exist in the exterior walls but they were often limited to narrow slits to admit light to the interior as well as reducing the intense glare of the tropical sun rays. Many newer Swahili buildings display Indian influence with ornate facades and verandas called *baka*. A common feature is the *baraza*, a stone bench facing into the street, where townspeople used to meet and chat. Many palaces have roofs that contain castellated battlements resembling the ones which are seen on the Omani forts in Kilwa, Zanzibar, Siyu, Lamu and Mombasa.

Although many ancient buildings were made of mud bricks, wood and thatch, only stone buildings survived. The stone buildings of the Swahili coast were made from coral which was burnt to create lime and mixed with sand or gypsum.

A major factor in the demise of the buildings has been water, which erodes the limestone foundations. The commonly used flat roof design, which works well in drier countries such as Oman, traps water and exacerbates dampness problems. Many flat roofs have been replaced with angled ones, but often at the expense of other building adornments.

Tombs

Some ancient Swahili settlements have distinctive graveyards which are unique to the East African coast. The graveyards are usually situated in a grove of Baobab trees. Their gravestones are ornately carved from coral ragstone and some bear large, obelisk-like pillars. These 'pillar tombs' appear to have their roots in pre-Islamic fertility rites: the twelfth-century Iberian geographer Al-Idrisi reported the worship of fish oil anointed megaliths in Somalia. Some surviving tombs date back to the 14th and 15th century when the Swahili-Shirazi civilization was at its height and the tradition continued to the second half of the 19th century. The curious pillar tombs can be found at several abandoned sites, especially at Kaole, Kunduchi, Tongoni (Tanzania) and Gedi (Kenya), but even in the suburbs of Dar es Salaam - at Msasani bay - there is a seldom visited graveyard where several pillars stand erect.



Pillar with Chinese porcelain bowls, Kunduchi, Tanzania. © Eric Lafforgue

The pillars can be square or octagonal and at Hamisi ruins on Pemba Island one particularly large tomb is surmounted by a ten-sided pillar with floral motif. The pillars often have several circular depressions that originally held blue-and-white Chinese porcelain bowls. Their presence is a monsoon-driven dhow trading network. Most porcelain bowls were stolen; Kunduchi is one of the few sites where the bowls are still in their original setting. There's one porcelain bowl at the Dar es Salaam site too. Two porcelain bowls from Kaole are in Dar's National Museum. Circular depressions that held porcelain bowls can also be found at ruins of medieval mosques - usually nearby the tombs - on either side of some well-preserved mihrabs (prayer niches that indicate the direction of Mecca). Noteworthy is a tomb in Tongoni that once bore an imported glazed tile with a Persian inscription, the only such example found in East Africa. This tile was also 'lost'.

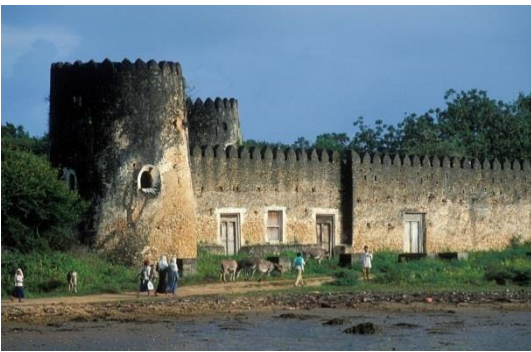


Pillar with Chinese porcelain bowl, Msasani, Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania

The presence of Baobab trees at the graveyards is explained by the custom that when a sultan died, a pair of baobab saplings would be planted at either side of his grave. These would eventually



The Gereza on Kilwa Kisiwani, Tanzania, was a fort built by Omani Arabs in about 1800. It incorporates the walls of a smaller Portuguese fort built in 1505



This fort in Siyu, Kenya, was built early 19th century. It contains several carved doors.



The Omani Fort in Stone Town, Zanzibar, was completed in 1701 (right). Its walls incorporate several Portuguese remnants: foundations of a chapel, a merchants house and earlier fortifications. To the left of it is the Beit al-Ajab, completed in 1883. It was the tallest building in East Africa at the time.

intertwine, effectively making the tomb part of the tree.

Carved Doors

A fascinating feature of Omani architecture is the ornately carved wooden door. This tradition originates from the areas around the Persian gulf, Afghanistan to Punjab in India where they were first mentioned in the 12th century. In East Africa they were described in Kilwa and Mombasa in 1500 AD by the renowned Duarte Barbarosa. But it was during the reign of Sultan Barghash, the third Omani ruler of Zanzibar between 1870 and 1880, that the doors got a boost. Barghash's contact with India - he had lived in Bombay - made it possible for carvers and craftsmen to be exported to Zanzibar.

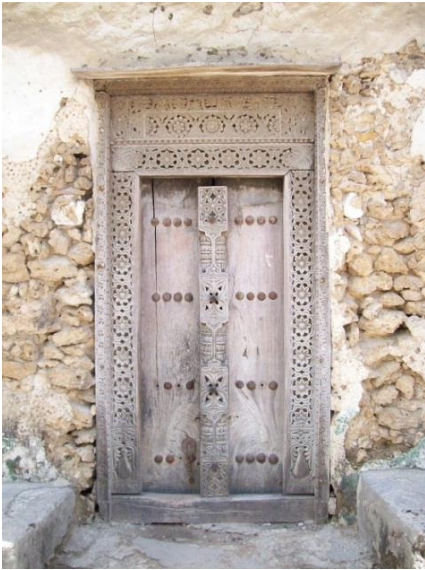
The door, which was often the first part of a house to be built, served as a symbol of the wealth of a household. Older 'Arabic' doors have a square frame with a geometrical shape, and usually contain a frieze, often with an oval plaque bearing a date, the house owners or artists monogram or carvings of passages from the Qur'an. Newer doors - many of which were built towards the end of the 19th century and incorporate Indian influences - often have semicircular tops, decorated with lotus and rosette flowers. The carving in these 'Indian' arches is sometimes perforated to allow light to pass through.

Other commonly seen motifs include the fish and waving lines - a reference to maritime and mercantile tradition - and chains - a symbol of security. Designs also include the stylised backwards 'S' representing the smoke of frankincense or the date tree, indigenous to Somalia and Arabia, all symbols of prosperity.

The doors are divided into two panels, the male on the right and the female on the left, divided by a central post which is carved deeply with geometric and floral motifs. The larger doors also have a smaller door inset into the left-hand panel.

CARVED DOORS OF EAST AFRICA

Kilwa Kivinje, Tanzania



Zanzibar, Tanzania



Lamu, Kenya



Chake Chake, Pemba, Tanzania



Zanzibar, Tanzania



Zanzibar, Tanzania



Mombasa, Kenya



Mogadishu, Somalia





View towards fort, palace and old waterfront buildings of Mogadishu, Somalia, in better days (1980).



House with intricate carved door, Shangani, Mogadishu, Somalia. The carved door is displayed in detail in the carved doors section. © Abdullahi M. Kassim



'Skyscrapers', Stone Town, Zanzibar

The longevity of Swahili doors, often outlasting the houses whose entrances they once guarded and being reset in new homes - is the result of the type of wood used. Many doors are made out of local hardwood such as the bread fruit tree (*Mninga*), but also teak and sesame imported from India.

Some doors have large brass spikes, which are also a tradition from India, where spikes protected doors from being battered down by elephants.

Further reading

Comprehensive books on Swahili architecture are non-existent and publications on the subject are very few. For further reading, the following selection contains the main sources available. Furthermore, for travelling East Africa and getting acquainted with remote Swahili settlements, Werner Hermans owes many thanks to the research done by Philip Briggs (Bradt Guides) and Jens Finke (Rough Guides).

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