

## Lamu Old Town (Kenya)

No 1055

### Identification

|                    |                               |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Nomination</i>  | Lamu Old Town                 |
| <i>Location</i>    | Coast Province, Lamu District |
| <i>State Party</i> | Kenya                         |
| <i>Date</i>        | 3 July 2000                   |

### Justification by State Party

Lamu is one of the oldest and the best preserved living settlements among the Swahili towns on the East African coast. Its buildings and the applied architecture are the best preserved and carry a long history that represents the development of Swahili technology. The old town is thus a unique and rare historical living heritage with more than 700 years of continuous settlement. It was once the most important trade centre in East Africa before other towns such as Zanzibar and Mombasa took over.

Since the 19th century, Lamu has been regarded as an important religious centre in East and Central Africa due to the *tarika* activities introduced by Habib Swaleh, a Sharif descendant of Prophet Mohamed (PBAH). There are many descendants of the Prophet in Lamu. Their presence has kept up that tradition, which continues to the present day Lamu in form of annual festivals known as *Maulidi*. These festivals are endemic to Lamu and draw the Muslim community from all over East and Central Africa, part of North Africa, as well as the Gulf region. Lamu is an Islamic and Swahili education centre in East Africa with an important Islamic college. Researchers and scholars of Islamic religion and the Swahili language come to Lamu to study this cultural heritage, which is relatively unchanged. The island town has adopted very little modern technology owing to its isolation.

Lamu exhibits an interchange of human values over a span of time on developments in architecture with its unique fusion of Arabic, Indian, European, and Swahili building styles. The town has been inhabited continuously since its foundation. Lamu is a reservoir of the Swahili culture and plays an important role as a religious Islamic centre as well as Swahili education centre for the whole of East Africa.

### Criteria ii and vi

### Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

### History and Description

#### History

#### - THE EARLY PHASE

The town of Lamu represents the Swahili culture, resulting from interaction between the Bantu, Arabs, Persians, Indians, and Europeans (in Arabic *sawāhili*, "of the coast"). The Swahili language is principally a mixture of Bantu and Arabic. The relevant cultural region extends from the island of Lamu in the north to Tanzania and Mozambique in the south, along the East African coast.

The origins of the town of Lamu date back to the 12th century, but the site was probably inhabited earlier. Archaeological evidence shows that there were two early Swahili settlements surrounded by walls, one to the south and the other to the north of the present town, which flourished in the early 13th century among the independent city states on the East African coast. It has been recorded as a large town with the office of *Qadi* (Muslim judge) in the mid 15th century. It first developed in the form of small clusters of stone buildings, including the Council Chamber, in the northern part of the present town (*Pangahari, Yumbe*) where the Friday mosque still is. The original market (*Utuku Mkuu*, the Great Market) lay west of this area. Later the town extended to the south (*Mtamwini*), an area north of the Fort, thus representing the full extent of the town in the 18th century. Lamu then came under Omani rule and was subject to the influx of Indian merchants from Gujerat in the 19th century. This period saw the building of the new Fort, and the development of the bazaar street, *Usita wa Mui*, and the area along the shore line.

Lamu was first developed by local Bantu people together with maritime traders from the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, and the Far East. The town merchants prospered acting as middlemen between the interior and the sea, exporting ivory and timber in exchange for manufactured goods such as cloth, porcelain and spices across the Indian Ocean. In 1506 Lamu was invaded by the Portuguese, who monopolized shipping and suppressed coastal trade; consequently, the once prosperous city state lost its position, and gradually declined. In 1585 and 1588 Lamu and other coastal towns suffered from raids by Turks and rose in rebellion but were crushed by the Portuguese. In 1652 the Sultanate of Oman was persuaded to help the city states to overthrow the Portuguese regime, which was accomplished in 1698.

- THE OMANI PERIOD Under Omani protection the coastal commerce slowly regained its momentum, leading to a further development of Lamu and the construction, by skilled craftsmen and slave labour, of town houses and mosques using coral stone and mangrove timber. The merchants' houses were decorated with Chinese porcelain, and slaves were used to maintain plantations, keeping a share of the crops in return. In 1744 the Mazrui clan started ruling Mombasa, forming an alliance with the town of Pate in the north and forcing Lamu to strengthen its defences. After winning a battle in 1813, Lamu invited Seyyid Said Ibn Sultan-al-Busaidi, the Sultan of Oman, to install a garrison to protect the town, leading to the construction of the Fort, which was completed in 1821. In 1840 the capital of Seyyid Said was transferred from Oman to Zanzibar, helping Lamu to prosper. In the 1880s the Sultan of Zanzibar was granted the islands of Zanzibar, Maria, Pemba, and Lamu, and a strip

of the mainland up to Kipini in the north. The inland was declared open for European exploitation.

Until the end of the 19th century the population contained a large number of slaves providing cheap labour and living both in the hinterland and in households. Freeman consisted of three social groups: the often land-owning merchants who lived in stone houses, the shariffs who claimed to be descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, and the fishermen and artisans. In the 19th century Lamu became an important religious centre as a result of *tarika* (The Way of the Prophet) activities introduced by Habib Swaleh, a shariff, who had many ancestors traced directly back to the Prophet Mohammed. The religious annual festival of *Maulidi* has continued up to the present day, attracting Muslim followers. Lamu has also become an important Islamic and Swahili educational centre in East Africa, owing to the relatively unchanged and conservative character of its Muslim society.

#### - THE BRITISH PERIOD

In 1890 the entire coastal strip north of Zanzibar was assigned to the Imperial British East Africa Company. The East African Protectorate was established in 1895 and organized into provinces and districts under the new British administration in 1898. Lamu became the headquarters of Lamu District, administered by a resident British officer together with a Muslim officer (*Liwali*, Viceroy). During the British rule many houses were built on the reclaimed seafront, but after the construction of the railroad from Mombasa to Uganda in 1901 and the transfer of Protectorate government from Mombasa to Nairobi the town's economy gradually declined. This was caused partly by the abolition of slavery at the end of the 19th century and the loss of cheap labour. In a way, this contributed to Lamu retaining its traditional character.

#### - KENYA

In 1963 Lamu became part of the independent state of Kenya. Aware of the cultural significance of the town, the government authorized the first conservation study, sponsored by UNESCO, in 1974 and the old town was gazetted as a national monument in 1983.

#### *Description*

The town of Lamu is located on an island known by the same name on the east coast of Africa some 250km north of Mombasa. In 1986 the population of the town was some 12,000. The town is made up of two distinct sections, one built in stone and the other in mud brick. The old town centre consists of large houses built in coral stone and mangrove timber. The relatively larger, surrounding area consists of mud, wattle, and *makuti* houses. The whole built area covers about 37ha, while the stone town is about 15.6ha (750m x 280m), articulated in three distinct areas: the oldest part of the town is in the north, the areas of *Pangahari* and *Yumbe* with the Council Chamber and the Friday Mosque, then expanding to the west and south in the 18th century (the *Mkomani* area); the bazaar street runs north-south behind the seafront; the Fort and the houses on the seafront were built in the 19th century.

The c 400 houses of the Mkomani area date mainly from the 18th century, forming the largest and historically and architecturally the most interesting part of the old town. It is characterized by narrow streets and two to three story buildings, mingled with small gardens. The SWAHILI HOUSES

are marked with simplicity and uniformity in their exteriors, but they have elaborately carved wooden doors particularly characteristic to Lamu. The massive walls are 40–60cm thick covered with lime mortar. The houses have an entrance porch (*daka*) and an interior vestibule (*tekani*) with seats. Inside the house the spaces develop around small courtyards (*kiwanda*) and open galleries (*misana*); they are decorated with painted ceilings, large niches (*madaka*), small niches (*zidaka*), and pieces of Chinese porcelain.

The town of Lamu is divided into small wards (*mitaa*), 36 in total, which provide the framework for the social structure. The LAMU FORT was built between 1813 and 1821 in the southern corner of the old stone town, encouraging new development, particularly on the seafront. The Fort is a massive multi-storey building with a central courtyard which has become an image of the Lamu community, being now used for weddings, meetings, and theatre productions. It also hosts the Lamu Conservation Office which manages the conservation and development of the town. The BUILDINGS ON THE SEAFRONT with their arcades and open verandahs provide a unified visual impression of the town when approaching it from the sea. One of the largest buildings on the seafront (dating from 1892) has been acquired as the Lamu Museum, exemplifying the finest characteristics of the verandah-style construction in the 19th century.

The section consisting of MUD-BRICK BUILDINGS covers an area of some 21ha and is spread between *Langoni* (the oldest part south of the Fort), *Tundami* (north of the old town), and *Gademi* (the newest part west of the old town). These are almost exclusively residential areas, with some commercial developments recently. Having first developed spontaneously, many of the houses have been transformed into permanent buildings with concrete block walls and corrugated iron roofs. Such development has taken place particularly after fires in 1962 and 1981.

#### **Management and Protection**

##### *Legal status*

A UNESCO-sponsored survey in 1974 provided the framework for the development of a conservation master plan, and the historic town was protected by law (The Antiquities and Monuments Act) in 1983. The gazetted area (about 3km x 4km) includes the entire historic town with its surroundings, and extends to the east across the water to Manda Island, where both the mangrove forest and the skyline are protected. Following this, all buildings, streets, frontages, open spaces, streetscape elements, and environmental features in the conservation area are preserved as historical and architectural features.

Protective procedures for the Lamu Old Town stipulated in the Antiquities and Monuments Act of Kenya are implemented following the Lamu Old Town Conservation bye-laws of Lamu County Council. Any development, improvement, or alteration of buildings or plots in the Old Town as well as in the outer protection area are subject to approval by the local Planning Commission.

The series of sand dunes extending on the waterfront south of the town form the principal area for fresh water and are being gazetted separately to guarantee their protection against any development. Furthermore, special protection is provided to the mangrove thickets on Manda Island.

## *Management*

The Lamu Museum was established in 1968, marking the start of an active interest in the conservation of Swahili culture. Several surveys and conservation plans have been prepared and published since: the first one in 1976 (Usam Gaidan), 1981 (W.H. Mangelus), and 1984–85 (F. Siravo). The last plan was adopted and the Old Town of Lamu was gazetted as an historic monument in 1986. The Lamu Town Planning and Conservation Office was established in 1987.

The management is controlled and executed by several authorities, each in the relevant field, including the Ministry of Home Affairs, National Heritage and Sports, the National Museums Board, the Director General of the National Museums of Kenya (in Nairobi), the regional unit of Coastal Archaeology and the Conservation and Planning Unit for the Coastal Region (in Mombasa), the Lamu Museums, the Lamu Town Conservation Office, and the Lamu County Council (in Lamu).

The District Commissioner as the Chairman of the District Development Committee is the coordinator of all development activities between the different parties in Lamu. The Chief Curator of the Lamu Museums is in charge of everyday conservation management and the Lamu County Council manages services needed by the residents. At the top, however, is the local planning commission which brings all the players together with the representatives of the community, and authorizes developments.

There are currently plans to upgrade the drainage system in Lamu by a Small Town Development Project. National resources are complemented by international and foreign funds from, for example, UNESCO and several development agencies. The European Union, in conjunction with the National Museums of Kenya, is sponsoring a programme for the renovation of Swahili houses. Expertise has been provided with the help of sponsors and on-site programmes have been organized to train local technicians in traditional Swahili artisan skills.

The number of visitors to Lamu has been about 15,000–20,000 per year, with about one-third from Kenya. The airport is situated on Manda Island and receives direct flights from Nairobi, Mombasa, and Malindi. The Lamu Museum is a resource centre for tourism, providing information and organizing tours. On Lamu Island there are two major hotels, in addition to private accommodation and smaller hotels in the area, amounting to some 500 beds.

## **Conservation and Authenticity**

### *Conservation history*

The old town of Lamu has survived until the present owing to fortunate circumstances, partly due to the remoteness of the area and the absence of roads and vehicles and partly to the decline in development during the 20th century. Being built in stone, the structures have resisted weathering and are relatively well maintained at the present time. Efforts are currently being made to improve garbage collection and drainage.

Recent increases in population and numbers of visitors are, however, creating pressures for change and have resulted in some problems despite the control mechanisms that are in place. The changes are felt especially in the gradual widening

of a society with a previous emphasis on privacy into a more open lifestyle, with consequent social conflicts. There is also an increase in the demand for visitor accommodation and the consequent conversion of private houses into guesthouses.

### *Authenticity and integrity*

Lamu Old Town is a rare example of a settlement that has maintained its social and cultural integrity up to the present day. The same applies to the historic fabric, which has well maintained its historical authenticity, both in material and in design. As a result of the efforts to provide training in traditional Swahili skills, there is currently a basis for the continuation of repair and maintenance respecting the cultural significance of the place. The town has also maintained its relationship with the surrounding landscape intact, and efforts have been made to extend environmental protection both to Manda Island and to the sand dunes in the south.

## **Evaluation**

### *Action by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Lamu in January 2001.

### *Qualities*

Lamu Old Town is the oldest and best preserved example of Swahili settlement in East Africa: it has maintained its social and cultural integrity, as well as retaining its authentic building fabric up to the present day. Once the most important trade centre in East Africa, Lamu has exercised an important influence in cultural as well as in technical terms. Characterized as being a conservative and closed society, Lamu has retained an important religious function with annual celebrations, and it is also a significant centre for education in Islamic and Swahili culture.

### *Comparative analysis*

The East African coast had commercial developments as early as the Roman period through Arabic and Indian merchants, and particularly following the introduction of Islam by Persian merchants from Shiraz in the 7th century. In this coastal region, there developed a particular Swahili culture, a mixture of African, Arabic, Persian, Indian, and later European (Portuguese) influences finding an expression in the development of architecture and settlements as well as language. The oldest remains of Swahili settlements date from the 8th or 9th centuries, such as those of the ancient town of Manda, close to Lamu, and the ruins of Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara (inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981: criterion iii) in Tanzania. From the 13th to the 15th century there were over a hundred city states along the east coast, but most of these have either fallen into ruins or have been transformed into modern towns. In Kenya, Mombasa, Malindi, Witu, Faza, and Lamu continue to exist; of these, Lamu is the best preserved example. Amongst the other Swahili towns are Mogadishu in Somalia and Zanzibar in Tanzania. Zanzibar is already on the World Heritage List (2000: ii, iii, vi), while Mogadishu and Mombasa have been subject to changes in the modern period. Most of the others are of later date or are only ruins.

Compared with Zanzibar, Lamu presents some similarities due to similar influences, but also many differences. The differences are particularly in the construction techniques as

well as in building typology, in the way the town developed, and how the spatial quality of single buildings evolved. The community of Lamu has been more conservative than that of Zanzibar, partly for cultural and religious reasons, partly helped by the smaller size of the town, its distance from major cities, and the absence of any motorized traffic. As a consequence, the town has also best preserved its particular Swahili character, and represents an excellent complement to the sites on the World Heritage List.

#### *ICOMOS recommendations for future action*

The ICOMOS expert mission confirmed the value of Lamu and its authenticity and integrity. The mission drew the attention to potential risks to the area, such as fire, the construction of hotels just outside the historic area, and the need to strengthen collaboration between the different authorities. Particular attention was given to the role of the buffer zone, the need for continuous updating of action plans related to management of change, and the possibility of exchanging management experiences with the Zanzibar Stone Town Authority.

While recognizing the serious efforts already undertaken by the authorities, ICOMOS wishes to underline the importance of the social and cultural quality of Lamu and the need to search for culturally sustainable development. Such efforts should certainly include continuous education as well as training programmes.

On the basis of the recommendations of the expert mission to Lamu, ICOMOS recommends that the buffer zone be extended to some 2km on the shoreline in order to guarantee control of new constructions, that a more detailed management plan be prepared with clearly defined tasks for the authorities, and that the possibility of establishing an inter-departmental Lamu Town Authority be considered.

#### **Brief description**

Lamu Old Town is the oldest and best preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa, retaining its traditional functions. Built in coral stone and mangrove timber, the town is characterized by simplicity of structural forms enriched by features such as inner courtyards, verandahs, and elaborately carved wooden doors. Owing to the conservative character of its Muslim community, Lamu has continued important religious celebrations from the 19th century, and has become significant for the study of Islamic and Swahili cultures.

#### **Statement of Significance**

Lamu Old Town is the oldest and best preserved example of Swahili settlement in East Africa. It has maintained its social and cultural integrity, as well as retaining its authentic building fabric until the present day. While built using traditional Swahili techniques, the unique character of the town is reflected in the architectural forms and spatial articulation. Once the most important trade centre in East Africa, Lamu has exercised important influence in cultural as well as technical aspects. It has retained an important religious function and is a significant centre for education in Islamic and Swahili culture.

#### **ICOMOS Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii, iv, and vi*:

**Criterion ii** The architecture and urban structure of Lamu graphically demonstrate the cultural influences that have come together there over several hundred years from Europe, Arabia, and India, utilizing traditional Swahili techniques to produce a distinct culture.

**Criterion iv** The growth and decline of the seaports on the East African coast and interaction between the Bantu, Arabs, Persians, Indians, and Europeans represents a significant cultural and economic phase in the history of the region which finds its most outstanding expression in Lamu Old Town.

**Criterion vi** 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.

#### **Bureau Recommendation**

That Lamu Old Town be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii, iv, and vi*.

ICOMOS, September 2001