

Executive Summary

Criteria under which property is nominated

The Historic Town and Archaeological Site of Gedi is nominated under Criteria (ii) (iii) and (iv)

Cultural landscape: indicate whether the property is nominated as a cultural landscape-No

Draft Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

Brief Synthesis

Gedi was one of the greatest and most important Swahili cities on the East African Coast and the only major Swahili city located 6.5 km away from the sea shore. The site is majestic in its architecture, size and spatial planning. The central residential area is the densest populated part of the city. The houses exhibit some of the best architectural features in a domestic house setting, planning, construction and amenities provided therein. The builders effectively utilized the local material such as coral rug, coral mortar and the abundant wood resources then, and also introduced a new element in the building material, earth mortar to firmly bind the structural integrity of the walls. Water engineering in terms of proliferation of wells within a very small area, storage and the distribution networks through conduits and drainage of storm water at Gedi is an exceptional feature that stands out in its complexity compared to other towns of its time. It is rich in archaeological deposit and the research carried out since the 1940s has contributed immensely to the understanding of the development of and collapse of the Swahili complex and urbanised society.

Justification for Criteria

Criterion ii

The Historic Town and Archeological Site of Gedi exhibits an important interchange of values on architecture, technology and town-planning as a result of its interaction and participation in the Indian Ocean trading system between the East African coast and Asia. The settlement features socio-religious, economic, and residential setting which accentuates the important role that the site played in the Indian Ocean trade. The religious and residential buildings at the historic urban settlement demonstrate an interchange of ideas in the use of building materials and techniques between the East African coast and Asia. The architecture of Gedi in terms of form, design and building techniques bear strong influences to those of the Islamic lands in Persia and around the Indian Ocean due to shipping and trade connections. Gedi's water engineering is a rare feature in this part of the world. With one of the most densely recorded wells in a city of its size, over 28 in number, Gedi exemplifies the importance not only of the technological know-how to locate, dig and maintain these wells but also the role of water in sustaining a huge urban settlement of this nature and its teeming population over centuries of occupation.

Criterion iii

The Historic Town of Gedi bears exceptional testimony to medieval Swahili culture and commerce along the East African coast from the 10th to the 17th centuries. It presents clear evidence of development of a rare architectural complex consisting of outstanding features in terms of forms, designs, planning, and materials. Some of the remarkable architectural features and forms that are unmatched include numerous sunken courts, houses and streets with sumps for rain water drainage. The town's design also included arched doorways for all houses, mosques, palace and toilets with urinals exhibiting the opulence and aesthetic tastes of the inhabitants of the town. Proliferation of wells, concentration of mosques and the associated intricate water engineering designs of the town are outstanding feature of a town of that time. The installation of talismans in many residential houses points to the town's strong ritual influences characterized by fusion of Islamic and indigenous African belief system. The elaborate town planning and water engineering design is a tradition that is not evident anywhere else in the Swahili coast of Africa.

Criterion iv

Gedi represents an important stage of Swahili civilization from the 10th to the 17th century in terms of its location, town planning and building forms. Owing to its relatively broad footprint, Gedi is one of the largest urban settlements on the Swahili coast of East Africa, out-sizing towns such as Lamu, Takwa and SongoMnara. Gedi is also the best preserved of the abandoned Swahili Islamic settlements and contains the highest concentration of standing monuments of the time. The town was built 6.5 km off the shore of the Indian Ocean, unlike its peers that were built on the coast. The Swahili architectural complex consisting of exceptional features and forms, designs, planning, neighbourhood with an elaborate palace complex and a Grand Mosque inside two rings of irregularly running walls is the best example of extant and diverse features of Swahili architecture.

Gedi is the only Swahili city of the time with a complete urban centre comprising all the component parts including town walls, streets, public buildings and private dwellings that are preserved in time. In addition, the amenities within the private and public buildings in the Historic Town were exemplary and sophisticated as already outlined above. At the time when such towns had hardly any toilet facilities inside the residential houses anywhere in the world including in Europe, Gedi had self-contained residential houses fitted with toilet and bathroom facilities accompanied by an elaborate water supply system to provide and store water for the various uses. Water was supplied using etched stone conduits and stored in large jars and holding dugout storage tanks within the buildings. Gedi flourished between the 13th to 15th century, a period referred to as the “Golden Age of the Swahili Civilization”. During this period, Gedi had the highest degree of opulence in wealth and standard of living of its people in the Swahili world. Each house had within it a storage or strong room for keeping valuables, a feature so far recorded only at Gedi

Statement of Integrity

Gedi is a well-protected national monument under the National Museums and Heritage Act 2006 of the Kenya laws. It was one of the earliest national monuments to be gazetted during the colonial time having been a protected heritage since 1927. Since then successive laws have been enacted to protect it. The condition of archaeological elements of the site remains largely intact due to the minimal and systematic archaeological excavations at selected localities within the site. The archaeology has contributed to a better understanding of the site and so to its conservation. The rich architectural structures have received constant maintenance since the site was first opened for research in 1948. This has been done through well thought out and deliberate mitigation measures and management practices that are respectful of the integrity and authenticity of the site including in material, form, style and traditional building practices. Despite the climatic and ecological changes that have been experienced over the years and that are often accompanied with various challenges Gedi remains intact as it was over 75 years ago,

The nominated area measuring 20.81 hectares contains all the town's historical features, including the wells, tombs, mosques, private houses, streets and alleys, sunken courts, palace, courtyards, inner and outer walls that are still intact. These are well mapped and documented for the purposes of conservation. The buffer area measuring 22.61 hectares encompasses some of these features plus one of the remaining remnants of African coastal forests. This indigenous forest which dominated the townscape after its abandonment in the 17th Century has created a natural buffer to the site, serving as wind, sun and rain breaker. In the 1990s, an outer perimeter chain-link wire fence was installed along the demarcated buffer zone to enhance the protection of the site's attributes. In addition, access to the site is through one gate entrance manned by security officers of the National Museums of Kenya who also frequently patrol the site. The site's administration offices, visitor centre, parking yard and other facilities are located slightly away from the historical and archaeological site. No physical development has been carried out near or within the inner or outer wall of the nominated area.

The buffer zone characterized by a thick indigenous forest has remained as a refuge to regional endemic floral

and faunal species. The presence of the natural forest offers protection to the continued existence of the cultural attributes that has also become a place of high spiritual significance to the local communities. The forest is well managed with the support of the Kenya Forest Service. The boundaries of the nominated site are well demarcated and the ancient stone town wall clearly delineates the original settlement.

Statement of Authenticity

The Site of Gedi still portrays its original architectural design, with same building materials, techniques and urban structure. The houses were designed as inward looking self-contained complexes with a plan organised around a courtyard. Opposite the entrance from the courtyard are series of wide parallel spaces of which the width (about three metres long) were determined by the optimum span of the mangrove ceiling beams. Roofs were constructed with flat pieces of coral laid on top of mangrove joists on which a layer of coral rag set in lime mortar was laid. The walls were built of coral rag bonded in lime and sand mortar which at times was mixed with local red clay. The town buildings were juxtaposed to each other creating a labyrinth of narrow street patterns. All these are still clearly represented at Gedi where all the maintenance work adheres to the original form, material and workmanship.

The original water sumps found in courtyards of buildings and streets are well preserved and functional, while most of the arched openings in the structures are still intact. The property has undergone regular minimal repair works to some of the buildings since the National Museums of Kenya took over its management in the 1960s. All the conservation works are done under the supervision of trained conservators using qualified, knowledgeable and skilled traditional craftsmen experienced in traditional building techniques. The repair works have not affected the character of the designs and materials used. All the work carried out are documented and archived for reference. Youthful apprentices with interest in traditional building techniques who were trained by the NMK in Lamu and Mombasa cultural training centres are engaged in the conservation works to ensure continuity of the Swahili construction skills.

The thick forest cover after the abandonment of the site around the 17th century has provided the site with protection against climate change induced impacts such as intense direct sun and erratic rainfall contributing also to the preservation of the archaeology of the site.

Requirements for protection and management

To date, the historic town is maintained with a proper management system designed by the State Party of Kenya through the NMK. This is implemented through collaboration with the local community and other state agencies such as the Kenya Forest Service and the Kenya Wildlife Service. Both the property's integrity and authenticity have been maintained through the management and conservation system in place. There is adequate site management staff in place that is well equipped for the daily running of conservation of the site including inspection and monitoring of the monumental, archaeological elements and the forest and its biodiversity. Gedi therefore continues to exhibit an example of a well taken care of medieval Swahili town of its period in the entire East African Coast.

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