

FOREWORD by Richard Leakey

The beautiful photographs in this book are a wonderful testimony to the skill and sensitivity of the author who has produced something that is quite different from the run of the mill publications on the Swahili culture in East Africa. It focuses on a subject little known in the West beyond academic spheres: the architecture of the Swahili stone towns. These stone towns extend along the entire length of the East African coastline from southern Tanzania northwards to Kenya, and beyond into Somalia.

The Swahili have been strongly influenced by Islam, introduced to the area in the late 9th century. But this is only one of many diverse elements that combined to create a unique Swahili style. Over the past thousand years, the Swahili have had contacts with many different people. Chinese, Indians, Europeans, and Arabs interacted with Africans, producing a rich cultural tradition. The architecture in the stone town reflects this fascinating history.

Lamu, Mombasa, and Zanzibar are all towns that offer examples of Swahili design for stone buildings. Lamu may be the best example and this is well illustrated in the pages that follow. The feature of this work that I find of particular interest is the use of contemporary examples -- residences that have been built afresh or old structures refurbished to provide modern living convenience. Some of these examples are very beautiful, and having personally visited some, I can confirm that they are truly as comfortable and special as has been so eloquently described by the author.

It is strange and lamentable that so few contemporary architects in East Africa make use of historical design traditions. In the coastal towns of East Africa it is all too common today to see structures that are totally unsuitable for the local conditions. Ugly boxes using too much glass do nothing for the comfort of the occupants nor for the grace of a town's street facades. I can only hope that books such as this one will promote a realization that the past can be relevant, and the use of ancient ideas in new contexts can be both pleasing and comfortable.

In historical times, there was no power for fans and electricity, and designers made every effort to maximize natural ventilation and cool rooms. With the energy crisis of the 21st Century and the exorbitant price of power, we should adapt to well-tested and proven concepts.

Another positive contribution that this book makes is to put forward a very positive aspect of Islam. In these days of terrorism and conflict, many westerners have unwittingly associated Islam with all things bad. This is both wrong and unfortunate. The Swahili architecture now featured in new buildings and designs has been heavily influenced by Islam in ways that offer a sense of inner peace and beauty to which we can all relate. The modern homes illustrated and described so brilliantly in this book will underscore this point very effectively.

I hope that this volume will be studied by town planners and architects who will work on future projects along the coast of East Africa. A case in point that is indeed relevant relates to plans to build a new port and city infrastructure in Manda Bay to the north of Lamu. This essential undertaking could be all the more valuable if the planning authority insisted on an architectural design theme that reflected Swahili culture where ever practical. Residential housing, street facades in the business areas, and community facilities such as schools and hospitals could all be designed to give a very special identity to this city in the making. That would indeed be something to celebrate!

Richard Leakey

This is my purpose, this my heart's design

To string pearls in a necklace, verse on verse

The great, pure pearls of Wisdom in the midst,

Small pearls of Thought a pendant down behind.

The Clasp I'll make by polishing my words

Arrange each gem in order where it fits...

[so that] the dark clouds of Ignorance dissolve

And, Wisdom's light and radiance blaze forth...

■ *Sayyid Abdalla bin Ali bin Nasir, Swahili poet*

■ *Al-Inkishafi (Catechism of a Soul)*

Photo Essay What is Swahili?

WHAT IS SWAHILI?

SWAHILI, a noun or adjective

(derivation: from the Arabic *sawahil*,
meaning shore):

The language, people, architecture, and
lifestyle of the tropical shores and coral
atolls of the

Indian Ocean coastline of East Africa;

Many know the surface of the ocean

but understand nothing of the depth.

Farid Ud-din Attar

SWAHILI is ... a lingua franca

A trader's language combining words from

Africa, Arabia, Asia, and Europe;

SWAHILI is ... a cultura franca

A fusion culture melding ideas from

Africa, Arabia, Asia, and Europe.

SWAHILI is ... an urbane townscape

Stone towns founded by traders and navigators
shaped by Islamic customs;

SWAHILI is ... a rustic seascape

Garden villages fashioned by farmers and fishermen
that shelter African traditions.

SWAHILI is ... an urban architecture

Townhouses built from blocks of coral

and framed with mangrove poles;

SWAHILI is ... a rural architecture

Country cottages woven from leaves of palms

and cut from coconut trunks.

SWAHILI is ... a school of thought
that transforms a city-state into a center of
cosmopolitanism, world learning, and integrity;

SWAHILI is ... a school of design
that transforms a space into a sanctuary of
serenity, sensuality, and spirituality.

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FOREWORD

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a wonder

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