

The Old Town of Mombasa

*Mombasa has a long history and has always been an important port on the Indian Ocean Trading Routes. The first town was probably built over 1,000 years ago. This pre-Islamic settlement, according to local tradition, was once ruled by a Queen called Mwana Mkisa, who lived at Gongwa somewhere on the Island. **Judy Aldrick** relates some of the town's history.*



Map of Mombasa taken from Livro do Estado da India Oriental, a Portuguese publication of 1646. It shows Fort Jesus, (size exaggerated), the Portuguese town separated from the town of the Moors by a wall, and a fort at Makapu

Mombasa is first mentioned in written sources in 1154 by the Arab Geographer, Al-Idrisi. He made a silver model of the then known world, considered flat not round in those days, and wrote brief descriptions of all the places he marked with Mombasa being one of them. The next important pointer in the early history of Mombasa is the unmarked grave in the grounds of the Alladina Visram school. This is said to be that of Shehe Mvita, founder of a new dynasty of rulers in Mombasa, the last of whom was Shehe bin Msham

deposed by the Portuguese in the late 16th century. They were called Shirazi and under their rule Mombasa became an important and powerful trading town.

The earliest buildings in the town were where the Coast General Hospital is now situated; the original harbour was the sheltered inlet that you can see when crossing the Nyali bridge and where nowadays a few small ship repairs are carried out. Later the town stretched southwards and in the 15th century covered the Mzizima area. Shirazi rule ended in 1589, when



Mombasa in 1872. An engraving from Reisen in Ost Afrika, by C C von der Decken, Leipzig, 4vv 1869-73

Seated from the left, General Matthews, Seyid Hamed bin Thuwein, the Sultan of Zanzibar, and Arthur Matthews. The picture was taken in 1895 when Mombasa was proclaimed a British Protectorate
Courtesy of A E N Adamjee Collection, Friends of Fort Jesus



the town was burnt by the Portuguese and its population decimated by a fierce cannibalistic tribe known as the Zimba, who came via the ford at Makupa where the causeway to the mainland is now.

The Portuguese first visited Mombasa in 1498 but the town, with an estimated population of 10,000, did not show itself particularly welcoming. Since it was too powerful to risk attack, the Portuguese sailed on to Malindi where they established their first base in East Africa. Though Mombasa was sacked and burnt at least four times by the Portuguese, it did not submit to their authority until 1589, when the Sultan of Malindi and the Portuguese Governor moved to Mombasa and made it the new headquarters of Portuguese administration in this part of East Africa. In 1593 the Portuguese started to build a fort to house the governor and a garrison of 100 soldiers, while the Sultan of Malindi moved into a palace in the Swahili town. By this time the Portuguese had divided up the east coast of Africa into two sectors, a northern sector controlled from the fort in Mombasa and a southern sector with headquarters in Mozambique. The Portuguese were chiefly interested in the gold mined in Zimbabwe and shipped out from Mozambique. They quickly gained a monopoly in the gold trade with all the metal being sent across to Goa in India, where the Portuguese had their main collection centre for the Indian Ocean trade.

The northern sector was not nearly so profitable as the southern and consequently Portuguese influence in East Africa was never as great as further south. But a small Portuguese settlement sprang up next to the Fort and included a customs house, one or two churches, shops and merchant houses. At the height of occupation only about 50 Portuguese settlers lived in Mombasa: most of the soldiers who garrisoned the Fort and the bulk of the settlers were either from Goa or were local people from other parts of the Coast. Portuguese maps show that there were two main streets, one that followed the line of present day Ndia Kuu and one down to the harbour. There also appears to have been

a track that lead to Kilindini on the other side of the island, where there was another Swahili settlement. A wall separated the Portuguese town from the town of the Moors, as the Swahili inhabitants were called in those days.



View down a narrow street in Mombasa Old Town

Courtesy Friends of Fort Jesus



Alladina Visram, a successful Asian Merchant, weighing ivory outside his offices in Old Port, Mombasa, around 1907 From *British East Africa: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries and Resources*, by Somerset-Playne, ed Holderness, Gale, 1909



View of typical house in Old Town on Mzizima Road
Courtesy Friends of Fort Jesus

Mombasa was ruled by Portugal for roughly 100 years, a time when the town declined as the Portuguese took all the trading profits for themselves, and the gold that had formerly been traded northwards to the Persian Gulf now all went to Goa. In 1698 Fort Jesus was captured by Arabs from Oman, who gradually replaced the Portuguese as the foreign dominating power of the area and were to remain at least titular overlords of Mombasa and the Coastal Strip until 1963. Between 1741 and 1837 the town was governed by an Omani family called the Mazrui who did not recognise the Busaidi sultans of Oman and thus considered themselves independent rulers. The 18th century was a period of further decline for Mombasa when trade was poor and the Mazrui governors simply moved into the deserted Portuguese town and fort. Timber, grain and ivory were the chief exports of this time and Mombasa town became increasingly dilapidated and run down.

The 19th century saw an improvement in the economic situation and this was largely due to the very able and successful Busaidi Sultan of Oman, Seyyid Said. He ruled from 1806 to 1856 and, by consolidating his territories in East Africa, created a strong trading empire with its capital in Zanzibar. Seyyid Said overthrew the Mazrui of Mombasa in 1837 and from then until 1888 Mombasa was ruled from Zanzibar through a representative appointed by the Sultan, called a Liwali. After the death of Seyyid Said his kingdom was partitioned among his sons and East Africa was ruled separately from Oman by a Sultan in Zanzibar. During the reign of Seyyid Bargash, Sultan from 1870 to 1888, Zanzibar grew rich and became a trading centre of international importance. This was partly due to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which meant that the shortest sea route between Europe and India passed via the East African Coast and the ships no longer had to go round South Africa.

Mombasa benefited from the increased prosperity and trade the new route brought. Settlers came from India and

Oman as well as from Yemen to set up new businesses and open offices. Houses were rebuilt and the town began to take on a more prosperous air. Several of the houses we see today were built on top of ruined Portuguese houses and the old foundations are often still visible. Unfortunately, as title deeds were not issued nor any kind of building registration carried out until the 20th century, it is usually impossible to tell when most of the buildings were constructed, and there is virtually no information about the appearance of the town until late in the 19th century.

East Africa also began to draw the attention of western powers who saw it as an area ripe for development and expansion. The Sultan in Zanzibar found himself overtaken by international politics and drawn into the competition between the superpowers of that time, Germany and England, who each wished to extend their influence in Africa. He was forced to cede control of his dominions and remained Sultan in name only. From 1888 Mombasa became the main port of the British concession that, to begin with, was managed by a private chartered company called the Imperial British East Africa Company. But as this arrangement did not prove workable and the company quickly became bankrupt, in 1895 control was transferred to the Foreign office and the coastal strip of Kenya became a British Protectorate. Until 1906 the administrative headquarters were situated at Mombasa but after the completion of the railway the centre of government was moved to

Nairobi. The coast, unlike the rest of Kenya, was never a full British colony as the coastal strip was leased on a rental agreement laid down in a treaty made with the Sultan of Zanzibar.

The chief inhabitants of Mombasa Old Town are the Swahili. Sahel in Arabic means the coast and Swahili originally meant coastal dwellers. Nowadays there is considerable controversy as to who is and who is not a true Swahili, but roughly speaking the term refers to those Muslim people who live in the coastal towns of East Africa and are the result of settlers mainly from Arabia intermarrying with the local people a long time ago. Very few of the original inhabitants of Mombasa survived the 1589 disaster when the town was sacked both by the Portuguese and the fierce Zimba. Most of the present-day Swahili inhabitants of Mombasa arrived during the 16th and 17th centuries. As the Swahili settlements up and down the coast decayed, refugees converged on the island of Mombasa. Some came to live in Mombasa town, while others went to Kilindini, a settlement on the other side of the island. In the 18th century Kilindini was abandoned and the Swahili from there also came to live in Mombasa town.

The Asians are another important community who live in the Old Town. There have always been Asian merchants and traders in Mombasa and a few can trace their roots back to the 18th century. Many came from India after 1870 when prosperity returned to East Africa and worked as bankers,



Lamu Lamu Kijani House Hotel

Kijani House is a small, very exclusive hotel overlooking the entrance to Shela harbour. In its leafy garden and around the freshwater pool you will find real peace and relaxation. While the verandah of your spacious room, furnished with coastal antiques, is the ideal place for planning exciting dhow safaris to experience the fascination of swahili culture. Or you can work up an appetite walking along the 12 km Shela beach, and return to an exotic selection of sea food, swahili dishes and a touch of Italian cuisine, in the Kijani restaurant.

Welcome to the peace and the pleasures of Kijani House.

Welcome to Kijani.

Special resident rates, package flight and accommodation.

KIJANI HOUSE: P.O. Box 266, Lamu - Kenya. Telephone: (0121) 33235, 33374, Fax: (0121) 33237

commission agents and skilled craftsmen; others came after 1888 with the British, when they were employed to build the railway and assist in setting up the new system of administration.

Probably the earliest Europeans to live in Mombasa after the departure of the Portuguese were a group of young British naval officers and seamen, who between 1824 and 1826 entered into a treaty with the Mazrui Governor and acted as representatives for an unofficial British protectorate. They hoped to set up a base for anti-slavery operations and in return agreed to guarantee Mombasa's independence from Oman. However as this was done without formal permission it was later withdrawn on political grounds. A lasting legacy of this interlude was the Leven Steps and the tunnel built by Lt Emery.

The 19th century was the great slaving period of African history and though Mombasa was never a major centre for slaving, unlike Bagamoyo, Kilwa and Zanzibar, a certain amount did go on. It was the anti-slavery movement that brought the next group of Europeans to Mombasa — the missionaries.

Ludwig Krapf was the first to arrive in 1844 and Johannes Rebmann followed soon after. They were both Germans and they founded the mission station at Rabai. During the 1860s the Methodist missionary Charles New worked in Mombasa. In 1875 after the closure of the slave market in Zanzibar, Frere Town was set up by the Church Missionary Society as a freed slave settlement on the north mainland opposite the town. Several of the European missionaries working there stayed in rented buildings in Mombasa and there was a large house in Ndia Kuu where the unmarried missionary ladies lodged. Photographs taken by missionaries are among the earliest pictorial records of Mombasa we have.

With the missionaries came the explorers and then the businessmen. Sir Richard Burton visited Mombasa in 1856 and Joseph Thomson came through in 1883 on his way to explore Maasailand. Lastly came the bureaucrats who also first rented houses in the Old Town before building new more spacious offices in Treasury Square.

The Old Town ceased to be a centre of administration by 1900. In 1922, when the new port at Kilindini was opened, the old Town lost much of its commercial importance as most shipping and trading offices moved to that side of the island along what is now called Moi Avenue. By the 1930s Digo Road had superseded the Old Town as the main shopping area. Nowadays most shops to be seen in the Old Town, other than small grocery stores, are those selling curios to tourists. It is strange to remember that Ali's Curio shop was once the central Police Station, while Anils Arcade was the main office of Smith Mackenzie, the commercial arm of the Imperial British East Africa Company. Others have changed less and there are several buildings in Ndia Kuu where the ground floor is still used for warehousing and the upper storey as accommodation. Tucked in behind the main streets a few old style Arab mansions with stone steps leading up to the carved wooden doorway can still be seen and the



Mr and Mrs Wray at home in their house in Ndia Kuu, Mombasa, October 1898
Courtesy of the Gladys Beecher Collection, NMK

occasional minaret of a mosque glimpsed down a narrow street.

Unlike Nairobi, which was a swamp until the 20th century, Mombasa town has seen the passing of many centuries. Its varied people and diverse building styles reveal its long and chequered history. Historic towns, however, need care and maintenance and by the late 1970s the fabric of the Old Town was falling into serious disrepair and modern buildings were replacing older ones at an alarming rate. It was feared that little would be left to remind inhabitants and visitors of 'old Mombasa' unless steps were taken to control the pace and planning of changes in the town so that at least some elements of its historic character would remain. Following the move to preserve the historic town of Lamu, in 1981 NMK sponsored a pilot study for the conservation of the Old Town of Mombasa that was undertaken by the University of Nairobi (Varkey and Roesch, 1981). In a bid to arouse further awareness the Friends of Fort Jesus brought out a guidebook to the town. In 1985 with funding by UNDP and technical assistance provided by UNESCO, NMK with the involvement (albeit minimal) of the Municipal Council of Mombasa initiated a conservation planning study for the Old Town. This study resulted in the drawing up of a detailed Conservation Plan for the Old Town of Mombasa (King and Processi, 1991). Finally in 1990, the Old Town was gazetted as a historical area of national importance. But unfortunately the bylaws for building regulations which are an essential part of the conservation plan were not adopted, and the subsequent delay in providing a legal framework has severely hampered the conservation process in the town. To date, historic buildings are still being demolished and inappropriate alterations and additions still being allowed. However NMK is hopeful that with the recent addition of staff at the Old Town Conservation Office and with the forthcoming EU programme for the revitalisation of Swahili culture at the Kenya coast, the unique qualities of Mombasa Old Town will be recognised and the conservation plan will at last be followed.