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The Island of Lamu

10 September 1970

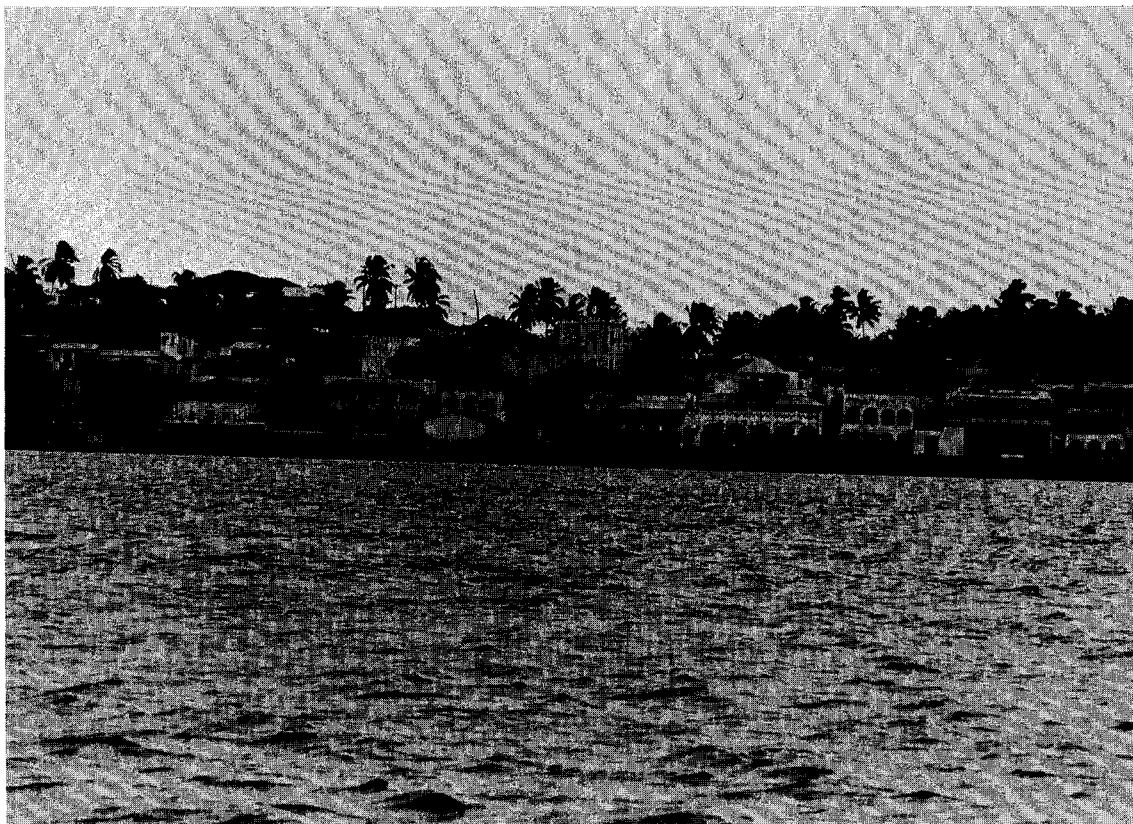
Box 21262

Nairobi, Kenya

Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Technological progress is very much in evidence in East Africa. There are few places where there is not an attempt to advance knowledge and skill in order to exploit natural resources. A recent trip up the coast of Kenya to a tiny island called Lamu, 217 miles north of Mombasa, allowed us to come in contact with a group of people who have not been caught up in the technological movement of East Africa and who subsequently are not faced with rapid social change as are other peoples of Kenya.



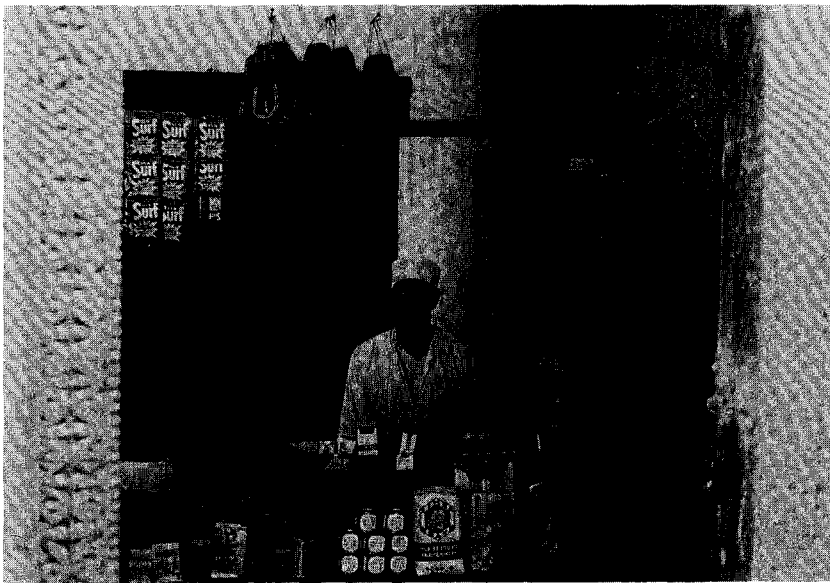
The Island of Lamu

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James Kirkman, an archaeologist, in writing about Lamu some time ago, made this rather extreme observation: "Lamu... unregenerate, grasping, perverted, polite and profoundly suspicious--it is refreshing to find one place in the world that does not pretend to believe in progress or indeed in motion at all."

The original development of Lamu (ca. 700 A.D.) has been credited to the Arabs--the first group coming from Damascus in Syria. Lamu, because of its natural and easily accessible harbors, became an important center for gold, ivory, spice and slave traders. Its importance as a central base of operations is attested by the constant battles for supremacy among many foreign powers including Persia, Portugal, Turkey and Syria. Inasmuch as the written historical account of the early centuries in Lamu is limited, oral exchanges have been the chief source of information regarding this period.

Prior to our visit to the island, we were fortunate to have received a letter of introduction to a local shopkeeper whose family history on the island dates back to the 16th century.



Bwana Jahadhmy

He spent many hours touring us around the island, relating historical tales which have been passed down concerning the skirmishes on Lamu. One anecdote which he delighted in telling involves a battle between the peoples of Hedabu and Weyuni, two sections of the island.

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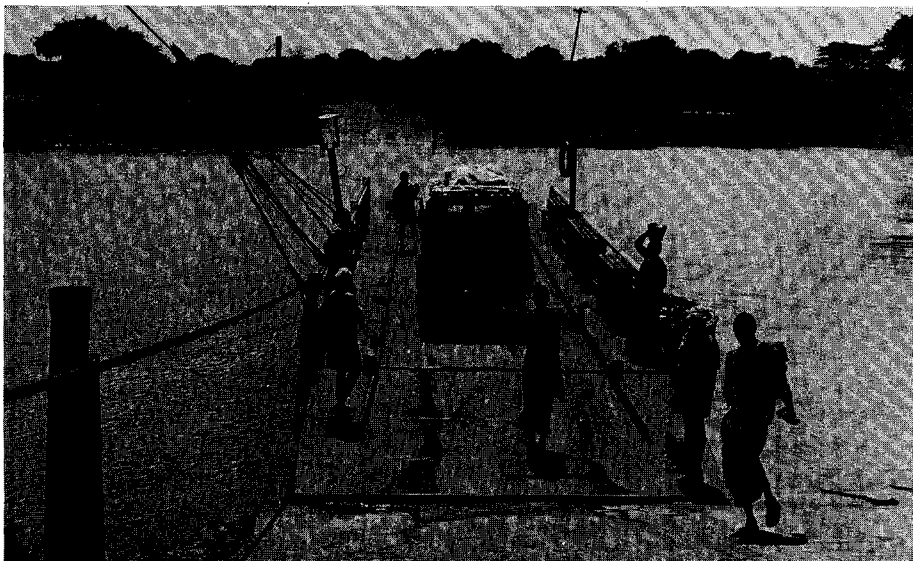
The incident occurred during the early period of Lamu history. The story goes that after a period of long and hard war each side simultaneously decided to call it quits and attempted to negotiate a peaceful settlement. Each group sent a letter to the other stating the desire for truce. While enroute, the carriers of the letters met and exchanged greetings and asked about the status of the other. The man from Weyuni related first that he had been given a letter to take to Hedabu to ask for peace. Sensing an opportunity, the messenger from Hedabu let it be known that his letter indicated war to the finish; however, if the Weyuni wanted peace he would return to his people to see if they would agree.

After deciding upon a peace platform, the Weyuni and Hedabu met to endorse the agreement. The Weyuni group, still thinking in terms of peace, came to the festivities unarmed. The Hedabus, however, brought daggers and shortly after the meeting got underway completely annihilated the Weyuni men. In this way the Hedabu group established ultimate power over the island.

Lamu or "Kiwa" (the proud isle), as it is sometimes referred to, is currently occupied by many different groups, but the predominate ethnic populations are the Arab descendants, who are referred to as the "real" townsmen; the Bajuni, a middle class and upwardly mobile group; and the African Swahili, who are considered the "lower-class". I have been informed by a resident of Lamu that although these classifications have been a part of the past, they no longer hold true. He feels that the class structure is rapidly breaking down and as evidence, pointed out shops and land areas presently owned by Swahilis. He also talked about their role in local government.

The population of Lamu town is estimated to be around 10,000. The land, which remains to a large degree under Arab control, covers an area of about 6½ miles by 3½ miles. The economy, although not obvious to the visitor, is substantial. Our attention was called to the fact that there were no beggars or destitute people on the island. People by our standards might be considered poor, but on the island they have a place to live and plenty to eat. Some of the main economic activities of the island are: labor export, cutting and selling of mangroves, transport services, fishing and some farming. In the past, the island excelled in ship building and repairing (the Lamu Dhow is still a hallmark of the East coast of Africa).

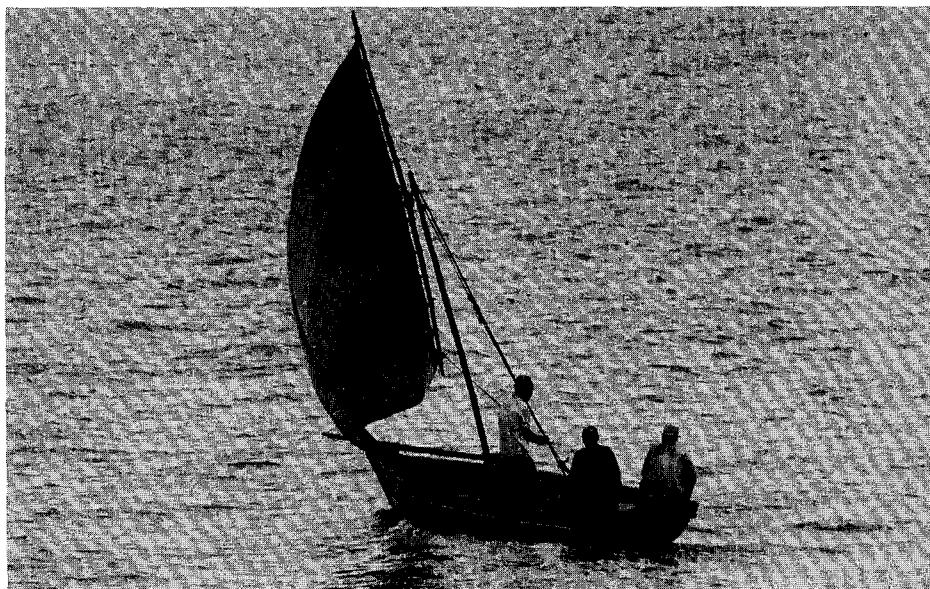
In order to get to Lamu Island it is necessary (for the better part of the year) to travel by a four-wheel drive vehicle or fly by chartered plane. During the good season, the plane lands at a sister island named Manda. During the rainy season the plane completes its flight at the same point as that of the land vehicles--at a little town on the main land called Makowe.



A short
ferry ride
enroute



The last
portion of
the journey



A familiar
sight approaching
Lamu

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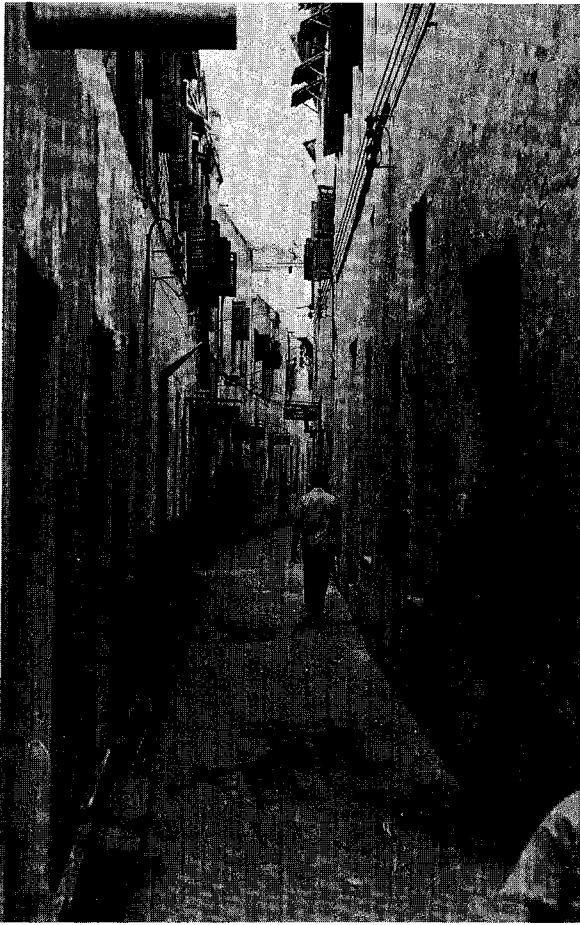
From either point, Manda or Makowe, it is then necessary to travel by boat to the island. The latter part of the trip takes about twenty minutes. The trip to the island, although far from being a pleasure cruise, is a wonderful introduction to Lamu. The boat winds its way past several miles of foliage with the boatman pausing now and then to wave at other boats making their way either to Mombasa or to other parts of the area. The warm sun, the blue water and the gentle rocking of the small motorized dhow mesmerizes its passengers almost to the point of sleep. However, the sights and sounds of the destination soon break the trance.

A massive sea wall running the length of the town is the dividing line between the ships loading and unloading and the multitudinous two storey white houses of Lamu. The houses, which are clustered together, are separated intermittently by narrow streets and crisscross alleys. The most striking feature of the island when one first arrives is the absence of cars and bicycles. Everyone walks, with the exception of a few people with donkeys--no matter how far the distance. It is possible, however, to see the periphery of the island by boat as well as to see the many surrounding islands of the archipelago.

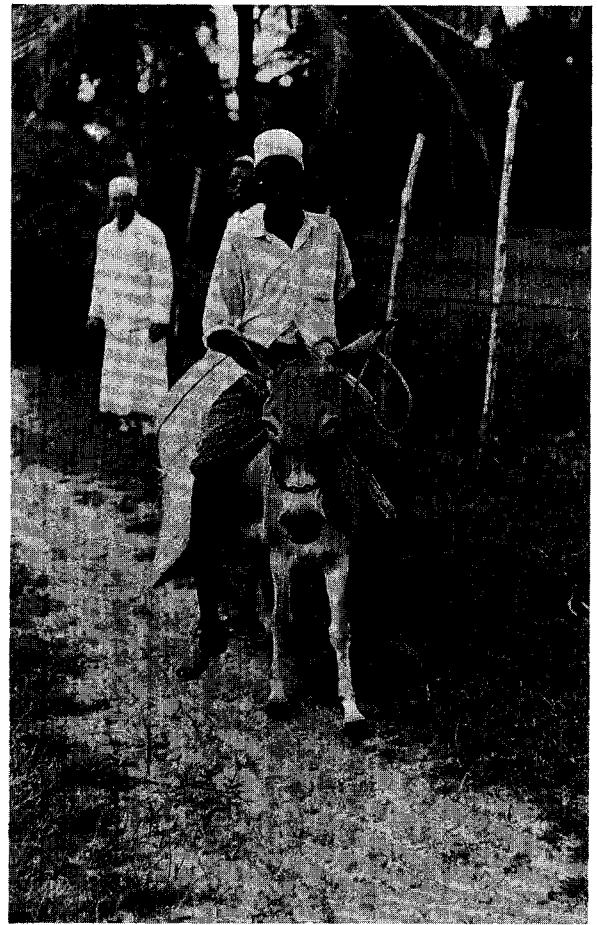
There is one plush hotel on the island run by a European family, but most visitors who really want to get the flavor of the island choose to stay in local housing and experience the indigenous cuisine. The main dishes are fish and rice. We were fortunate to get the services of a Swahili lady who prepared the menu and cooked each day. During the week we received a variety of fish cooked in coconut oil...changu, guru, king, prawn, and lobster. Because of the abundance of mango trees we had many delightful fruit treats. The house in which we finally lodged had two refrigerators but neither one worked. It was therefore necessary to have fresh food brought from market each morning.

Although we were expected to arrive the day before, our host was at the docks to meet us. In fact, most of the twon appeared to show up and watch the unloading. We later found out that although visits to the island are becoming more frequent, residents are usually aware and apprised of all the activity of the newcomers.

After a general tour of the island for the first couple of days, our host, Bwana Jahadhmy, very proudly took us to his residence which has been home for his family for over 400 years. As are most of the homes, his house is constructed of stone and mud wattle. Outside the entrance sat a large stone with indentations along its sides. We were told that this rock had been brought from Muscat when the first family arrived and was used to sharpen the daggers of the men.



The streets of Lamu



The only means of transportation
other than walking



Downtown Lamu

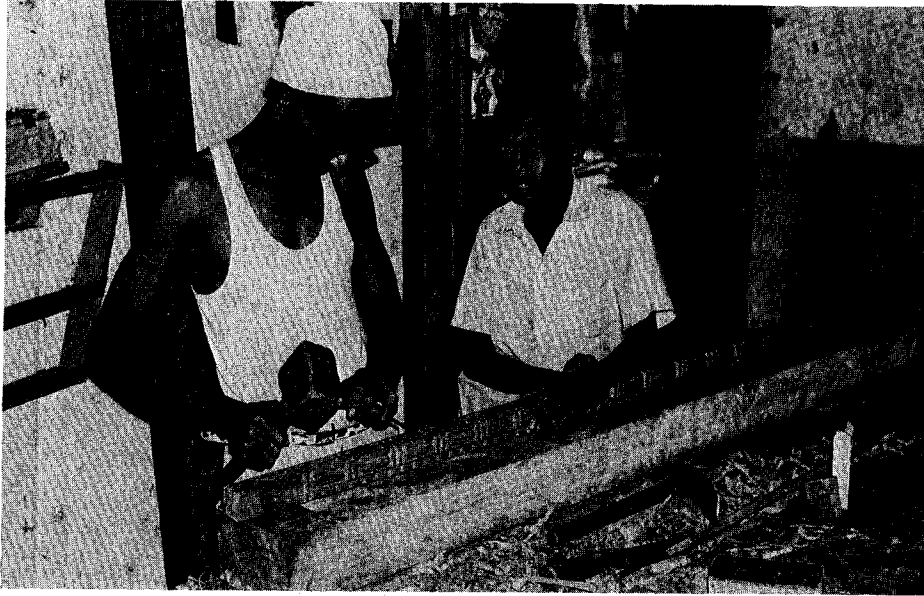
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The rooms of the house were quite small in area, but had very high ceilings. Most of the rooms opened up into a courtyard where orange and mango trees were growing. Although the weather outside was extremely warm, the house was refreshingly cool.

Bwana Jahadhmy's house was furnished with a mixture of modern and antique artifacts. The antique Arab chests and Lamu chairs were especially interesting. The Lamu chair is made of ebony and cane. It has a tall back with very short arm rests with intricately inlaid pieces of ivory. We were briefed about the chairs before our arrival and told to purchase one if at all possible. Butas with other treasured items of the island such as copper trays, gold and silver jewelry, large outside concerns have just about exhausted their supply. We were pleased to learn, however, that a museum which is about to open on the island has secured many of the rare and noted items associated with Lamu. This project, one hopes, will insure the permanency of much of Lamu's history.

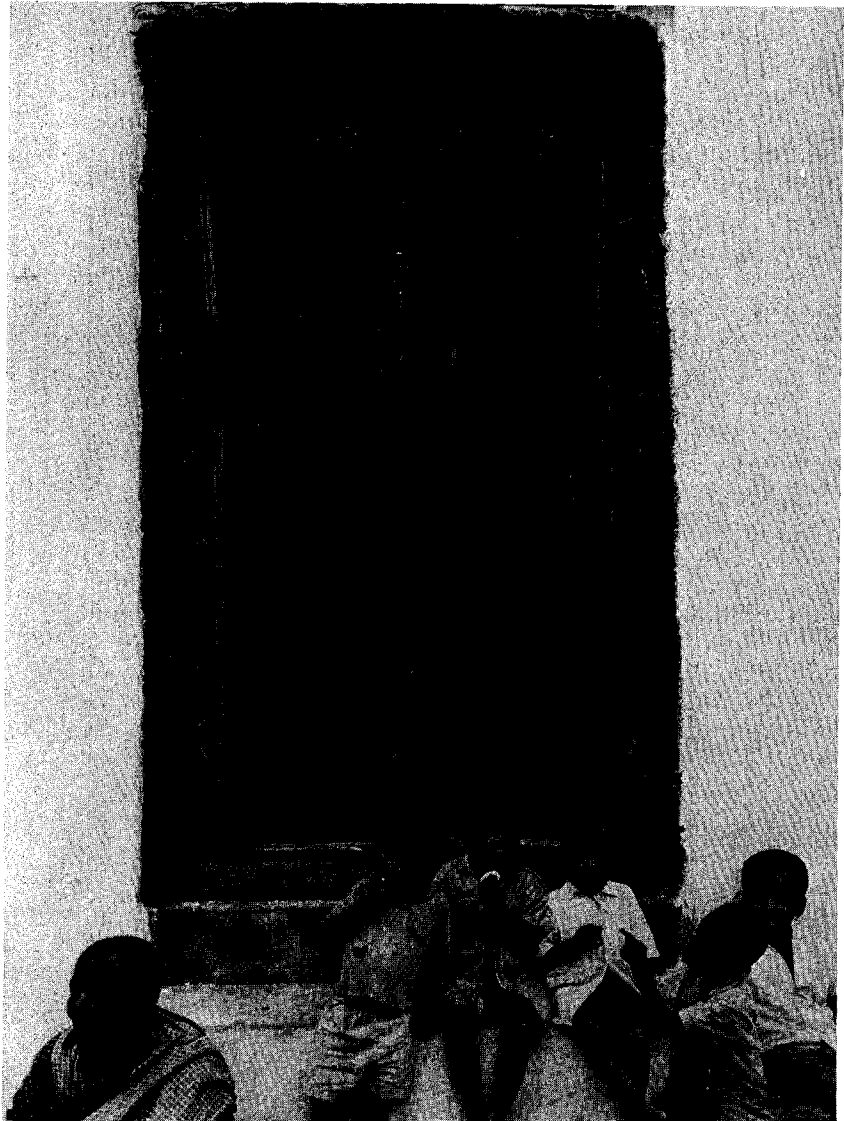
During our movement around the town, we were most impressed by the many houses and stores possessing intricately carved doors. We were under the impression that such fine workmanship could be afforded only by the rich people of the island, but much to our amazement we were told that the doors are not representative of wealth. The availability of manpower and raw materials made the price such that it could be budgeted by the majority of the families. We also learned that there were different qualities of doors. The most expensive and sought after came from the workshop of Abdulla Ali Skanda. Bwana Skanda's reputation is known throughout Africa. He has been commissioned in the past to carve for many outstanding people and organizations. In an unpretentious fashion, he related that he has carved doors for the Parliament of Kenya and the High Court of Tanzania, and has made a chair for Haile Selassie during one of the Prime Minister's State visits. He is also noted for the very fine model dhows which he carves.

In addition to the fine doors, we noticed an extremely large building in the center of town. Not only did the size of this fort-like building command our attention, but also the activity and sounds made it quite interesting. We later found out that the building was indeed a former fort built by the Arabs in the early 19th century. It now serves as the town prison--the sounds and movement which we heard were made by the prisoners performing their daily activities. The prison has the air of a community center rather than a jail.



Bwana Skanda

The Lamu
door

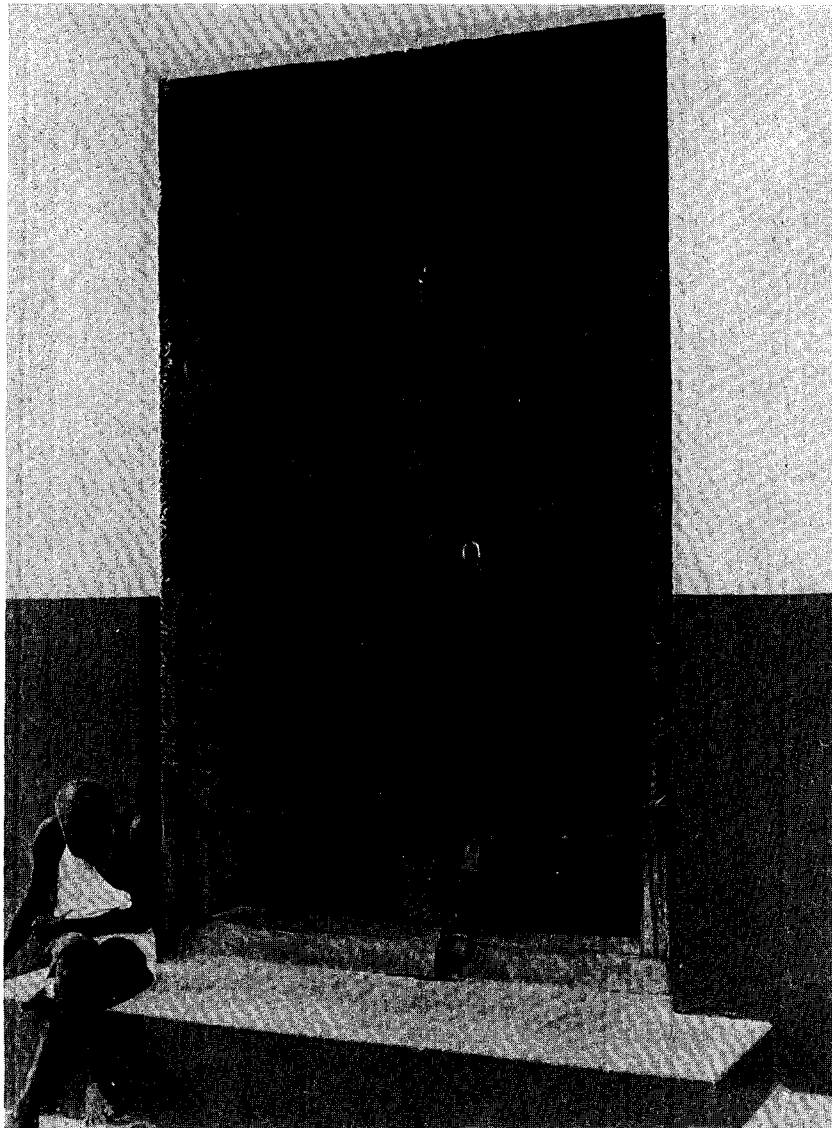


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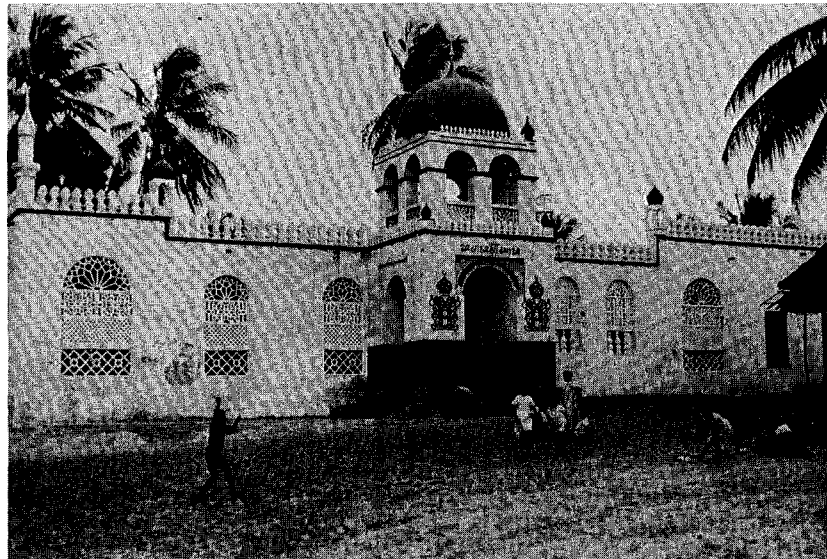
The other institution on the island which offers equally as much activity during the day is the mosque. There are over forty mosques on the island which are used by the men for prayer and worship during certain time intervals. We spent a great portion of our time simply listening as the men performed their ceremony. Our host told us that prayers are said five times each day. The first marks the beginning of the day for this predominantly Muslim society. It is called maghribi and takes place between 6:30 and 7:30 p.m. A short time later, within an hour, the esha prayer is uttered. This prayer period extends until after midnight. Alfajiri is the early morning worship--its time period extends from approximately 4:00 to 6:00 a.m. Between 12:30 and 2:30 p.m., during the lunch hour, althuuri is said. The final prayer of the day, alasiri, takes place between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m. In celebration of the Prophet's birthday last year, over 26,000 people from all over Africa gathered at the mosque, Riyadhha. It is hard to imagine such a number of visitors on the island at one time.

Just as the prayers play an important role in the lives of the adults, small children--four to five years of age--are given daily instructions in the Koran. Until very recently their daily lesson consisted of learning the entire Koran by rote (30 chapters). It was most unnerving to pass by these classes and see these youngsters rocking and reciting a particular passage--unnerving because they did not understand what they were saying and with any faltering or omission of a word they were struck by the teacher with a plaited whip. I have since asked many Muslims about this particular practice and whether or not it will continue. I am informed that the Koran has now been interpreted into Swahili and very shortly all Koran schools will use the new syllabus which will have more meaning for the youngsters and will eliminate the mechanical recitation. They also note that teaching methods will change as the educational system of the island progresses. This year marked the first year that schooling beyond the primary level has been offered. Prior to this year young people who wanted to continue their education were sent either to Mombasa or to Zanzibar.

As I reflect on my visit and the contents of this newsletter, it is apparent that although the physical qualities of the island are recorded with a reasonable degree of accuracy, it is impossible at this point to give an adequate impression of the people--their attitudes, beliefs, or desires. We were told about the beautiful women of Lamu prior to our visit, but we saw the women only at night; or I should say we caught glimpses of the women darting in and out of the shops. For the most part they were dressed in black buibuis and had their faces covered. In contrast, the men wore the traditional Muslim white embroidered caps and a white robe-like garment called a khanzu.



Door to the
local tobacco
shop

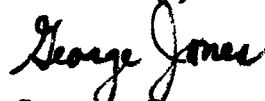


Riyadha
Mosque

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The native population as well as the serious visitor seem to be very possessive of Lamu. Even with its unusual beauty and fascination there appears to be the desire to keep the "tourist" away. Nevertheless, people who have visited the island have expressed a desire to return. I too share these feelings. The physical features of the island are enough of an attraction, but it is the many unknown factors about the people which have created a challenging curiosity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "George Jones". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

George Jones

Received in New York on October 5, 1970.

