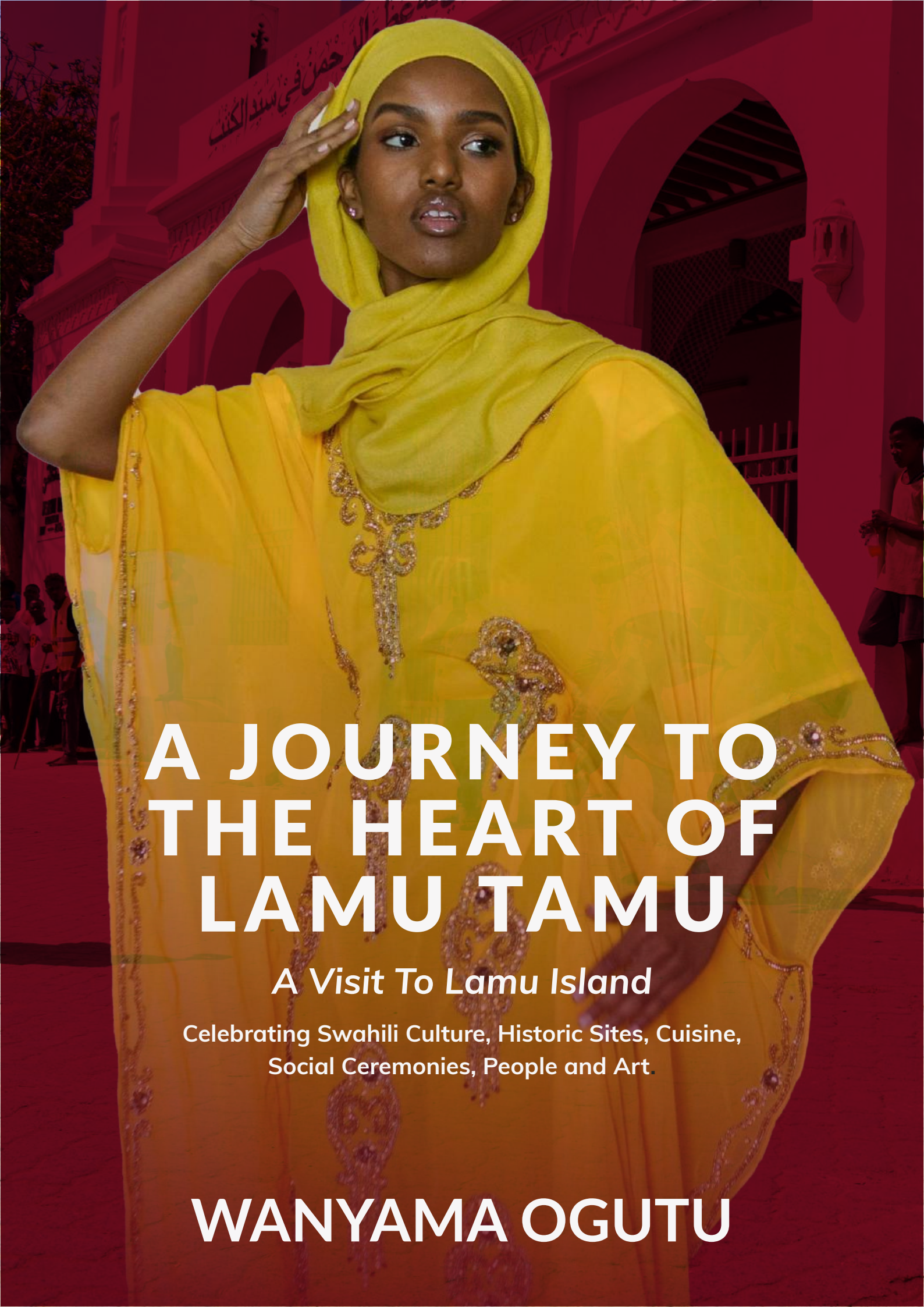


A JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF LAMU TAMU

A Visit To Lamu Island

Celebrating Swahili Culture, Historic Sites, Cuisine, Social Ceremonies, People and Art.

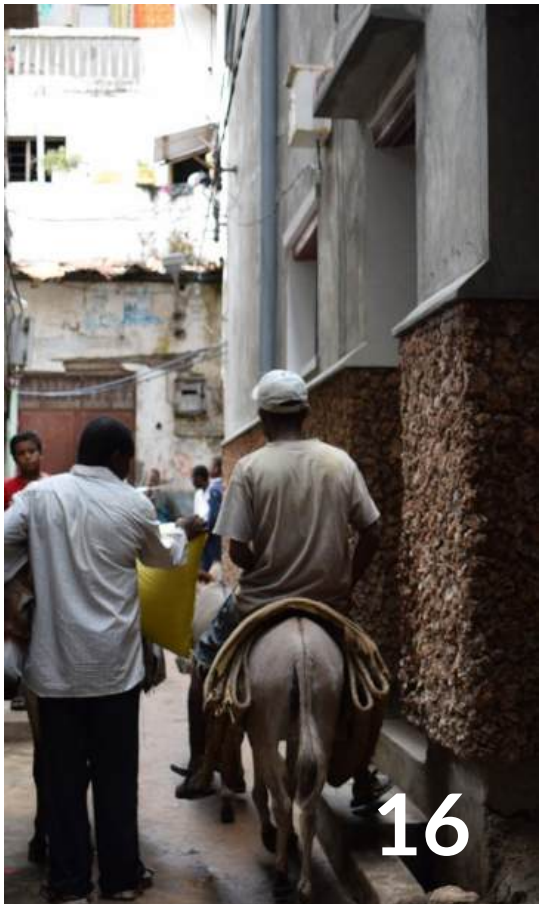
WANYAMA OGUTU

ISBN 978-9914-9407-2-5

Passing Through Garrisa Route To Lamu Island

The Garissa route to Lamu Island gives you a view of the vast vegetation in Machakos, the hills of Kitui, and the endless arid lands of Garissa.

Also, you can't miss the drama between commercial bus drivers and their conductors. They make the road trip look like a comic show.



A Walk with Satan in the Vichochoro of Lamu Town

The Lamu Tamu (Island) has an impressive picturesque landscape for impressionist artists. It has an astonishing linear perspective of Swahili buildings, mosques, restaurants, and hotels.

Love and affection of Swahili wedding

The true story and history of a people is written in the tenets of their culture. And one of the most beautiful aspects of culture of any people is wedding or the union between a man and a woman.

Featured STORIES

The shenanigans of Lamu Island festival

Cultural festivals have a way of bringing out the common unity among people. From traditional attires, to local cuisine and art. It is beautiful when the people of a community come together to celebrate their cultural heritage.

Ngoma Dance at Lamu Cultural Festival

The Ngoma dance is one of the many highlights of the Lamu Cultural Festival. A beauty to behold and also be a part of.

The donkey race competition in the Lamu cultural festival

To the people of Lamu, old and young, the donkey race competition is not just about sports, but about a culture that brings the community together.

Storytelling is such an amazing part of the culture of African people. It was the tool through which elders told the history, the growth, the challenges, and the victories of the community.

Before storytelling became a thing that is used for attracting tourism, it was a way of giving life to past events and how things evolved in the community of those whose stories are being told.

This is what Wanyama Ogutu, Aka Wanyax, has done with this publication. Taking the story of Lamu Island and giving it some wings to tell itself from the eye-view of the people of the Island themselves.

In a world where people can get whatever narrative they want from the internet, Wanyax has taken the time to travel to Lamu Island, captured the everyday life of the people, and also took time to interact with the cultural activities, local cuisines, art, history, and places within the Island. It's such a beautiful thing to read his story.

I hope you will enjoy reading these stories like I have.

Samuel Phillips
Creative Director
(philpsalmist@protomail.com)

Wanyama Ogutu

(wanyamaogutu93@gmail.com)

Mr. Wanyama Ogutu is a scholar in the Master of Arts (Fine Art) program at Kenyatta University. He is also a practicing artist specializing in drawing, painting, and sculpture in Nairobi, Kenya.

His study focuses on painting, its philosophy, education, and extension to African art. Most of his artworks focus on interaction, the environment, culture, and education. He is depicting cultural aspects of the Swahili of Lamu Island using a combination of natural plant pigments from Lamu Island as painting mediums. Giving an impart on his master of fine art research.

Mr. Wanyama is passionate about fine art research, including its philosophy, development, and relevance. He writes on profound academic topics that are presented and published in international journals and conferences worldwide.

An insightful writer, he also publishes monthly in African magazines and newspapers. Additionally, he conducts training in drawing, painting, fashion sketching, and art history at various institutes in Nairobi.

Preface

Lamu is a living tapestry of Swahili culture displayed during annual Lamu cultural festivals. It is a celebration of the richness of East African culture, and it remains uncorrupted despite the high pressures of globalization and Western ideologies.

The magazine documents the visit to Lamu Island and the period the writer spent conducting research on cultural aspects of the Swahili people of Lamu, for his Masters of Arts (Fine Art).
His research highlights cultural aspects like dhows drifting across the horizon, donkeys roaming the vichochoros (narrow pathways), the ngoma dances (traditional Swahili dances), the sound of Allahu Akbar, and the conflicts at the open field of Mkunguni.

Each story captures the spirit of the people of Island, their hospitality, cultural contradictions, and relationships. The tales are inspired by oral histories shared by key informants, personal encounters, and imaginative folklore.

It is important to note that the stories are not strictly a scholarly record of Swahili culture or an authoritative historical facts of Lamu Island.

It is a reflection of the

writers' journey to Lamu Island and a celebration of the vibrant Swahili culture of Lamu residents.

I invite you on a journey to the heart of Lamu Tamu. Walk through this journey, experience the heart of Lamu Island, and immerse yourself in the Swahili culture. Listen to its silence and feel the pulse of the Stories of Lamu Island.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who contributed to this magazine titled; A Journey to the Heart of Lamu Tamu. A memorable visit to Lamu Island.

I am deeply thankful to Dr. Jesca Kinoti for always cheering me on throughout my journey in Lamu Island. I am grateful to Mr. Chai Baya and Dr. Eliud Biegon for theirs wise counsel that helped me in engaging with the Swahili community. Special thanks go to Dr. Douglas Ouma for encouraging me to explore further beyond Lamu Island. I am sincerely grateful to Mrs. Khadija Issa Twahir for graciously hosting me at the Lamu Museum and sites.

My appreciation also goes to Mr. Zephaniah Lukamba for generously lending me his professional camera, which enriched the documentation process. I appreciate Mr. Anthony Ngondo for laying the groundwork for the stories I uncovered during the visit.

Lastly, I extend my warmest thanks to Mr. Samuel Phillips, the Creative Director of Msingi Afrika Magazine, for his dedication to seeing the stories featured in this magazine come to life.

Wanyama Ogutu

Endorsements

The breeze dances through the narrow alleyways of Lamu old Town carrying the scent of the sea and spices. It carries stories whispering through coral stone walls, and the grains of dhow sails that have long the Indian Ocean. This collection opens a door to the soul of Lamu, offering readers a glimpse into the rhythms, struggles, joys, and wisdom of the Swahili people.

Lamu lives and breathes stories rooted in centuries of cultural exchange, from African to Arab, Persian to Indian, and the Swahili civilization.

The stories within these pages are drawn from the fabric of everyday life: a fisherman setting out before dawn, children chasing shadows in the late afternoon sun, and the quiet call to prayer echoing across rooftops.

These are not tales polished for foreign eyes. They are lived experiences, memory, and humor. The voices of Lamu rise above the tides of time, reminding us that every narrow street, carved doors, and the silence of the Island.

As you turn these pages you will witness the heartbeat of the Lamu people, the sea,

and the moon. These are their stories and they are your stories too.

Khadija Issa Twahir
Librarian of National Museums of Kenya, Lamu Fort Museum Library

Thank you, my postgraduate student.

This collection is a tribute to the still life of the Swahili people. It captures the voices of a scholar from the Department of Fine Arts at Kenyatta University who visited Lamu Island for his master's degree in Fine Arts. I am proud of my painter and Fine art student. Congratulations!

The writer highlights that the Swahili people of Lamu as guardians of culture and Islamic faith. The stories started in Nairobi and continued to Mkunguni Square of Lamu Island. The writer strolls through the streets of Lamu and depicts the lives, traditions, and modernity of the Swahili people.

In these pages, you will find fiction interwoven with the truths of our African life. The stories are soft and clear to the ear. Reading "A Journey to the Heart of Lamu Tamu" is a walk through the history of Lamu Island in the present day.

Dr Kamau Wango
Chairman, Department of Fine Art and Design at Kenyatta University

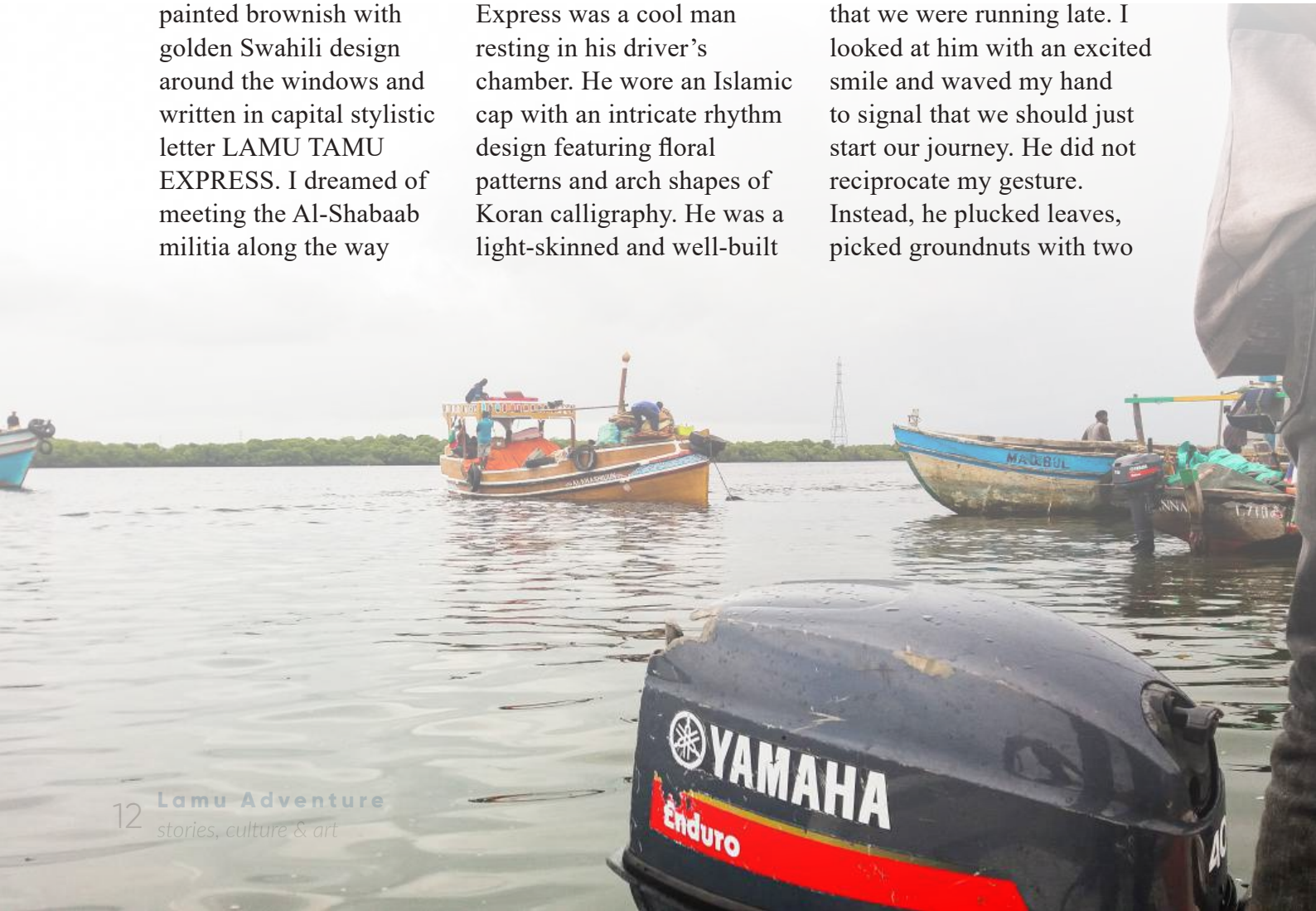
MY JOURNEY TO LAMU ISLAND

Passing Through Garrisa Route to The Island

I still remember the wholeheartedly appraisal from the Lamu Fort Museum officials; chief librarian, Khadija Issa and curator Mohammed Mwenje, "We u miongoni wa watafiti kutoka Afrika wachunguzao utamaduni Uswahilini Kisiwa cha Lamu." (You are among a few researchers from the African regions exploring the peculiar culture of Swahili and our environment here on Lamu Island).

I took a front seat next to the driver on a bus going to Mandera county, at the bus park in Nairobi's' River Road street. The bus was painted brownish with golden Swahili design around the windows and written in capital stylistic letter LAMU TAMU EXPRESS. I dreamed of meeting the Al-Shabaab militia along the way to Lamu Island, catching a glimpse of the vegetation in Machakos, the hills of Kitui, and the arid lands of Garissa.

The driver of Lamu Tamu Express was a cool man resting in his driver's chamber. He wore an Islamic cap with an intricate rhythm design featuring floral patterns and arch shapes of Koran calligraphy. He was a light-skinned and well-built man. He had a blue eye with a distinctive red spot on his face. From time to time, he pressed the horn and the accelerator created a loud noise to alert passengers that we were running late. I looked at him with an excited smile and waved my hand to signal that we should just start our journey. He did not reciprocate my gesture. Instead, he plucked leaves, picked groundnuts with two



fingers, and tossed them in his mouth.

I turned to the lady sitting next to me near the bus window and stretched my hand for a warm handshake, but she turned aside and raised her arm to cover her Jojos' (breasts). Her pretty arms were decorated with a beautiful floral design. She was a Muslim lady with light skin in a hijab dress that emitted a strong fragrant "idi" smell. Let me call her the "Hijab lady".

The fragrant smell found me coughing repeatedly while shielding my nose and mouth.

Finally, one cough escaped with the utterance: "Nifungulie dirisha!" (opens the window). She turned her black hijab and covered her Jojos tightly. "Msungulie dada!" (lady opens the window) the driver interrupted. She slightly opened the window with agitated gestures.

By this time the bus was rumbling, and the conductor was edging closer to inquire about the travelers' tickets.

He tapped my shoulder and I flashed out mine from my pocket. The hijab lady had hidden her ticket inside the black hijab, and she was trying to access it with difficulty. The ticket was stuck between her white legs and our seat. She tried to remove it but failed and turned to me helplessly. The conductor was becoming impatient and groaned loudly, "Ninja wapi ticket!" (show me the ticket Ninja) I quickly gathered my composure and came to her aid. I lowered my head between her white legs and the seat and pulled out a small bag. She quickly grabbed the bag and produced the ticket. "Ndiyo hii ticketi, (Here it is!). Then pulled out her hijab and smiled at me. I also smile back with a tap on her Jojos.

"Yusufu, twende sasa! (Let's go now!), shouted the conductor. I then knew our driver's name. He honked the horn loudly and pressed the accelerator. We began our journey to Lamu Island.

Yusufu stuffed his mouth with chewed leaves and stems like a goat. Next to his side mirror was a bottle of Coca-Cola and water. He placed a bag of chewed leaves and stems concoction next to the gearbox. I guess the concoction kept him alert throughout the long night journey. "Twapita Garissa?" (Are we taking the Garissa route?) I expressed my curiosity about encountering al-Shabaab along the way.

Yusufu turned to me with an amused look revealing his rotten teeth and the green stains. He controlled the bus steering wheel with one elbow while using the other hand to pluck leaves from the gearbox, break open groundnuts on the dashboard, and then toss the concoction into his mouth. We sped past famous buses like Pwani Express, Mombasa Raha, and Mandera Kwetu, and a large cargo truck in the distance. At one point, Yusufu would extend his index finger out of the window in disgust lamenting about the new drivers on the road.

Early in the morning, about 300 yards away, we were awakening to "Alsalalala!" exclamations from Yusufu. We noticed six young men covering their faces, standing in front of our bus. They were armed with guns perched on their legs. The driver stopped the bus at their feet. The conductor sprinted from their seat and shouted, "Cheki hapa! shika mzigo wako!" (We have checked up and carried your luggage).

Suddenly, a sniffer dog jumped onto the bus followed by one of the masked men holding a pistol. The dog jumped on a hijab lady causing her to shake her legs in fear. The hijab became loose and fell from her face. I bent down and picked up

the hijab from the sniffer dog's mouth. Immediately, Yusufu turned to my seat, unlocked a box, and retrieved a brown envelope. He handed it to the man in front of the bus and took it with two fingers. At that moment I felt a wave of fear on my nerves. The Garissa route is notorious for hijacking, bombings of buses, and the illegal trafficking of migrants.

I began to regret my desire to encounter the Al-Shabaab militia on my journey to Lamu Island.

I remember a professor warning me on traveling to Lamu by road. He gave me a newspaper cut out of a bus from Nairobi that was bombed along the same route. It had a fatal pictures of a passenger lying dead with gunshot wounds and a wreckage bus on the road.

At this time, the men escorted the hijab lady a distance behind the bus, followed by the conductor.

Yusufu followed the conductor holding something folded tightly in his hand and handed it to the men with guns. For a brief moment, my eyes locked with one of the masked men, and I forced a smile pretending nothing had happened. He then turned away and signaled our bus to continue our journey.

The hijab lady ran back quickly, while the conductor paced slowly.

I closed my eyes for a nap and wondered why we used a dangerous route (Al-Shabaab militia road) to Lamu, and why the bus; Lamu Tamu Express, was involved in crime by ferrying an illegal hijab lady.

The interaction of the driver and the conductor with the men with guns was suspicious. I guess they were illegally abetting the transport of hijab lady to Somalia.

There was a drama of breaking a box in my seat, the panic of the hijab lady in handcuffs, and the negotiating conductor. I opened my eyes when someone tapped my back.

The bus was moving very fast and the passengers very quiet. The sound of cool breeze was pouring through the windows as Yusufu focused on steering the bus.

"Why look at Afande (police) face to face?" "Stop your stupidity!". The conductor blustered me in Swahili diction.

I knew that those men were anti terrorists police officers manning the Garissa route to Mandera. They were uncomfortable with my look because they were involved in mischievous business. They thought I was a CID police officer or an anti-corruption man.

The conductor fumed at me so fervently. He pushed my head to hit the hijab lady, but I kept quiet.

We traveled through the hideout of the Al-Shabaab militia in the thick and dense Boni Forest. The troops of Kenya Army were constantly moving in speed back and forth in their speed vans. We saw people in civilian clothes with AK-47 guns lying dead before army armored vehicles. These are no fun things to see, but at least it gives comfort to know that the Kenyan government is doing much to keep the road to lamu Island safe. And for that, I appreciate them.

In another instance, we heard the sound of military helicopters roaring overhead with their guns pointed at the forest. We passed through the semi-desert of Garsen, where we saw the end of the earth and sandy ground. This is the place where the Hijab lady disappeared in a speeding translucent pro-box car to Somali direction. After

a long travel, we passed through the bushy lands to Lamu mainland.

Mokowe is a small town located on the mainland of Lamu County. Its most prominent features include a mosque, vibandas (small shops) that house bus offices, and old harbor buildings.

A few steps away is Lamu Sea with a parking yard for the cargo and passenger boats known as mashua, race boats, and fiber boats.

The town is populated with young men running around. Many of them wore aging Islamic caps, shorts that reached knee length, and WORLD CUP T-shirts written in ARGENTINA, FRANCE, BRAZIL, and English football leagues.

They are engaging in heated arguments in the Swahili language about ownership of the passengers. Some are seen grabbing passengers' luggage to their favorite boats, while others are hawking their eyes for the potential passengers.

In the distance, you could see a group of young men offloading goods from a lorry to a boat, while others carry large fish from the sea. Women are seen carrying baskets filled with barafu (cool fruit waters), cold water, mkorosho (cashew nuts), kashata, mabuyu (baobab fruit), and mango juice. It is very hot of approximately 35°C, and a breeze is blowing from the sea. Everyone is sweating, while some women with baskets moving around cooling their bodies.

A tall young man approached me and we headed to a standby mashua (a traditional large triangular sailboat) on the sea of Mokowe. We finally sailed on the sea to Lamu Island accompanied by six women in buibuis, four in hijabs, and two Swahili men wearing bright white kanzus. The mashua boat moved swiftly past old Swahili buildings, hotels, and a vast expanse of mangrove forest.

I still remember the wholehearted appraisal from the Lamu Fort Museum officials; chief librarian, Khadija Issa and curator Mohammed Mwenje, "We u miongoni wa watafiti kutoka Afrika wachunguzao utamaduni Uswahilini Kisiwa cha Lamu." (You are among a few researchers from the African regions exploring the peculiar culture of Swahili and our environment here on Lamu Island). It still warms my heart till now.
My research stretched me to delve into Islamic traditions, Swahili culture, and the natural resources of Lamu Island. I vividly recalled a feverish battle at the university defense room.

Professors were evaluating the cutting-edge study and its potential impact on a new generation of artists in Africa and beyond.
I stood confidently and underscored that it is high time for artists in Africa to draw inspiration from the environment.
I challenged the idea of artists and scholars relying on foreign materials and Western ideologies to forge their own identities.

After the defense, the chairman of the Kenyatta University postgraduate board; Prof George Vikiru declared my research was worth pursuing. It marked a journey to explore unique African culture as a subject, and utilizing the native environment as a source painting medium.

One needs to dream impossible things and take risk; it may fail or succeed, but an ambition gives birth to good fruit according to French President Emmanuel Macron.

A WALK WITH SATAN IN VICHOCHORO OF LAMU TOWN

The Lamu Tamu (Island) has an impressive picturesque landscape for impressionist artists such as Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Auguste Renoir, and Camille Pissarro. It has an astonishing linear perspective of Swahili buildings, mosques, restaurants, and hotels. On the opposite side is an atmospheric view of the sea with some boats and a forest of mangroves. A crowd of women dressed in brightly colored buibuis' and hijabs' strolls slowly in pairs taking in a low tone. The men are walking looking up wearing kanzus, vikoi, long-sleeved shirts, and Islamic capes.

I disembarked from the mashua (a traditional large triangular sailboat) and stumbled upon a mischievous one-eyed boy who was hawking at me. He stuffed his mouth with Gomba (chewing gum), Muguka, and Miraa (Khats') while puffing off the smoke of bhang (Cannabis sativa). He smelled of rotten fish and the stench of bhang smoke. He quickly noticed me and grabbed my bag, but I held it tightly fearing a robbery.

The one eyed-boy was stammering heavily in a broken French, English, and Swahili. He talked shaking his head and throwing his hands in the air fighting mosquito oozing in his ear.

He struggled to pronounce various historic sites I needed to visit. Finally, the boy yelled loudly, Mr Chairman Sir! The stutter could not allow him to utter words like "accommodation" instead he stuttered "abduction". I got more scared trembling my lips in Jehovah prayers.

Suddenly, an old man showed up and shouted at him, "Mwache we fala!" (stupid leave him). The boy disappeared into the bustling crowd shamelessly looking down. The old man introduced himself as Mzee Bakari, a retired civil servant who had worked in Tanzania, Mombasa, Malindi, and Zanzibar. He welcomed me to the resort hotel two hundred meters away from the sea.

I stayed in a Swahili house converted into a resort hotel. It was named "Tausi Kipenzi Resort", a colorful peacock bird that is superior among other birds.

The Resort is a few Jumba la Swahili (Swahili houses) with spacious rooms and an atmospheric view of the sea. It featured large Bajuni carved doors coated with limestone coral walls. It had a wide baraza (veranda) next to door steps where the visitor rested. Inside the Tausi Kipenzi Resort were large corridors and staircases that led to vijumbas (upper rooms). Other sections of the room were cemented with a white plaster. The walls were engraved with arches and semi-circle patterns. The Swahili furniture and ceramic items were placed strategically in every corner. The beds, stools, chairs, and cabinets were designed with floral and arch-shaped patterns. The furniture was carved with geometrical shapes and relief lines inspired by the Arabic style.

It had a prayer section roofed with a dome shape and a floor carpeted with floral patterns. The room had an arch-shaped stool where the Quran was placed. In the far corner, there was a Swahili washroom in a dome shape with a toilet and a bathroom. The washroom had a small container made from coconut shells and a mangrove stick handle. The kikao (large courtyard) had four erected pillars that formed an arch shape.

The doors and windows took the semi-circle and arch shapes. The ray of sunshine beamed through the doors and windows brightening the kikao. The Jumba la Swahili

> *"Mzee Bakari gave me a room on the fourth floor adjacent to baraza (outside veranda). Most of the time I enjoyed a perspective view of the calm sea, a linear of Lamu architectures, green vegetation of Pate Island, take-off of aircrafts in Manda Island, and the docking of ships in Lamu port.*

belonged to the royal family or wealthy traders from Oman, Zanzibar, and Istanbul.

Mzee Bakari gave me a room on the fourth floor adjacent to baraza (outside veranda). Most of the time I enjoyed a perspective view of the calm sea, a linear of Lamu architectures, green vegetation of Pate Island, take-off of aircrafts in Manda Island, and the docking of ships in Lamu port.

I watched a mashua gliding across the water carrying passengers and lapsset government projects connecting lamu with other regions.

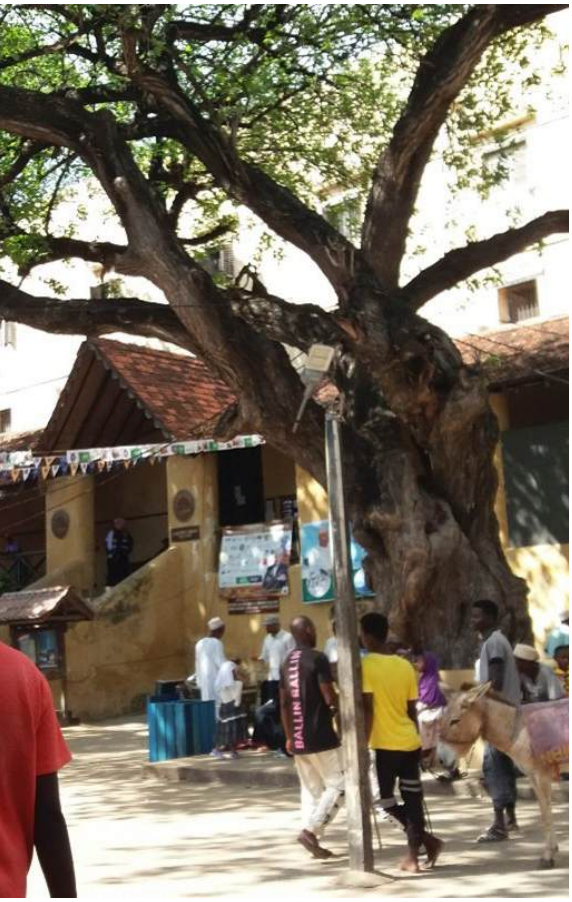
Occasionally, I could hear an engine boat roaring speedily and splashing out waters in the distance. Most of the time, the room was hot and I stood at the baraza in my white vest and kikoi greeting a refreshing breeze from the sea.

The vest helped to regulate my body temperature, and the kikoi kept my lower half cool. The sebuleni (bedroom) had a notable six-by-six bed made of carved mangrove wood with a rhythm of floral design. The bed had a specific name, pilipili, is a Swahili word that means green chilli pepper. The bed has a top rear part of the bed resembles how the chillies actually grow on a real tree. Just like a drop of pilipil on your tongue, the bed arouses sexual sensation during sexual intimacy.

Far in the corner, there was a two-by-four bed made of coconut leaves called ushutu. It was used by pregnant mothers and a woman nursing a baby. Opposite ushutu was bembeya (a swinging baby carrier) made of mangrove wood wrapped with pieces of lesos and kikoi.

I placed my head on the pilipili bed in the sebuleni and body chilled like pepper until my kokoi fell off my pelvis. The “idi” fragment smell filled the house with sweet candy air. The mattress was incredibly soft and it was covered with white spotless bedsheets.

There were two pillows with floral patterns lesos. It was written in seductive words: “MPENZI USINIWACHE.” When I touched the pillows



my heart raced and I felt a warmth radiating from the lower half. I strolled slowly towards the baraza to catch a breeze from the sea, then sat in the kiti cha enzi (easy chair where a man rests after or before sex) next to the bed. I reclined on the pilipili bed with my stomach facing down, then turned right, rolled left and eventually l was asleep. Suddenly, I touched the naked hijab lady beside the bed. She had undressed herself. Her nipples were pointing at my hairy chest. Her lower half back was sparkling with floral designs decorated with henna. I slowly advanced my hands on the hips stretching toward the depression of spinal code. My heart was pounding faster and my lower half was breeding heat that could boil any egg.

Abruptly, l heard a hard knock on the door and sprinted out of the pilipili bed. I was dreaming. Mzee Bakari was at the door waiting to take me for breakfast at the sea of Lamu Island.

The sunrise warmed the calm sea causing sparkles of light to dance on the mashuas. Fishermen emerged from the sea carrying buckets of fish, while passengers were still sailing on mashuas. People jovially exchanged cock crow Islamic greetings “As-salaam alaykum “ with one another.

A small crowd of men enjoying cups of kahawa tungu, kahawa tamu, and chai ya mwarabu. They hold pieces of viazi karai, mitai labania, kahimati, mahamuri, and keki ya wali (Swahili breakfast). Bakari instructed the man serving breakfast, “yu mgeni wangu mtafiti chuoni mpe chai kaka!” (he is my visitor and a scholar from university). He quickly served me with wali wa keki, viazi karai, mitai labania together with kahawa tamu.

I sat at the edge of the sea placing my toes in the water. Mzee Bakari joined me with kahawa tungu and a full plate of mahamuri. He reminded of my research educator: Dr. Antony Ngondo, a generous man,

kindhearted, friendly, and full of knowledge of Swahili culture. Mzee Bakari spoke fluent Swahili like Dr. Ngondo mixing Arabic and English. Told me stories of Lamu Archipelago wars between Sultan Oman and Portuguese in Lamu. He also expressed frustration with Wabara (foreign people from the coast of Kenya), Italians, and Chinese for interfering and belittling Swahili culture.

At lunchtime, Mzee Bakari took me to the famous Mama Rukia Swahili Dishes a hundred meters away from the breakfast café. She had three beautiful daughters serving delicious pilau, biriyani, mandi, samaki wa kupata, mbaazi wa nazi, kamba wa nazi, achari wa birimbi samaki kamba, maharagwe wa nazi and chapatti ya mswahili (Swahili cuisine).

The lovely girls had draped themselves with flowery lesos' and a kangas' written, DAWA YA MUME MPE CHAKULA. They had pierced their noses and ears with sparkly rings from Swahilis of Pate Island.

The place was full of men and many never left Mama Rukia's Dishes without a return.

I reached out to Sir. Uhuru Aswad for a follow up on his photography exhibition of Lamu's old town, racing donkeys, drumming, and various sports activities on social media. Our phone conversation made me think that Uhuru was a distant relative of retired Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta. I admired his good command of English. The day I met him, l was standing at the entrance of the Lamu Forte Museum under mkuyuni tree. It is a famously Swahili gathering centre of Lamu Island. He said over the phone that he couldn't see me at mkuyuni.

I turned backward and saw a fair senior man standing before me. He wore a yellow Michael Jordan sports vest, a pair of blue polyester shorts, and Maasai sandals. He had a red cap written TUPARK that hid his dreadlocks. His eyes were covered with translucent sunglasses.

When he pronounced "WANYAX ARTS!" (my artistic name), l spotted some missing and broken stained teeth. He had a long tongue too like of the lizard with red spots. When he removed the cap to scratch his scalp, gosh! Uhuru was a bold man. His few white hairs were rolled into long

dreadlocks.

I got scared but pretended to be strong. He immediately embraced me warmly and threw a few welcoming words in English. Everyone relaxing at mkuyuni greeted, “Satan!”, “As-salaam alaykum” (Satan is his popular nickname in Lamu island) and responded with a gracious smile.

He introduced me as a renowned scholar from the University. I affirmed his sincere introduction with a “thank you” in Swahili.

It is said that a child on a back of an African woman does know how long the journey is.

Satan took me through key historic places on Lamu Island. He furnished me with insightful information about the Swahili culture. He guided me through vichochoro (pathways) which were densely populated with old Swahili houses, Swahili galleries, old shops and vibanda (small shops), and the graveyard of the Sultans.

We mingled with a group of young and old women dressed in colorful buibuis’ and hijabs. We greeted old and young men wearing white kanzus with Islamic caps, a pair of shorts, vikoi, and sports t-shirts. We stood aside to pave the way for donkeys carrying luggage.

We edged against vichochoro walls to let a man riding a donkey pass on a swift. We spotted a pack of dogs with sympathetic eyes lying on the Bajuni’s doors. We saw a group of cats perched on the coral stone windows meowing at fishermen with a bundle of fish. We waved at Mama Korosho and bought barafu (cool fruit water) from small girls calling out barafu sales along the vichochoro. We refused the offer of Korosho (cashew nuts) from some beautiful ladies sitting in the baraza. The Swahili ladies courteously responded with bursts of laughter throwing their backs up and down as they danced ngoma za vugo (a Swahili dance where women shake their backsides). At one point we watched a teenage boy and girl flirting in kichochoro.

Satan whispered that teenagers get married at a young age of 13 as long as their parents approve.

Finally, we reached Satan’s home, another Jumba la Swahili.

PHOTO SPLASH

وإنك لعلى خلق عظيم
نبي عظيم خلقه الخلق الذي له عظم الرحمن في سيد الكتب

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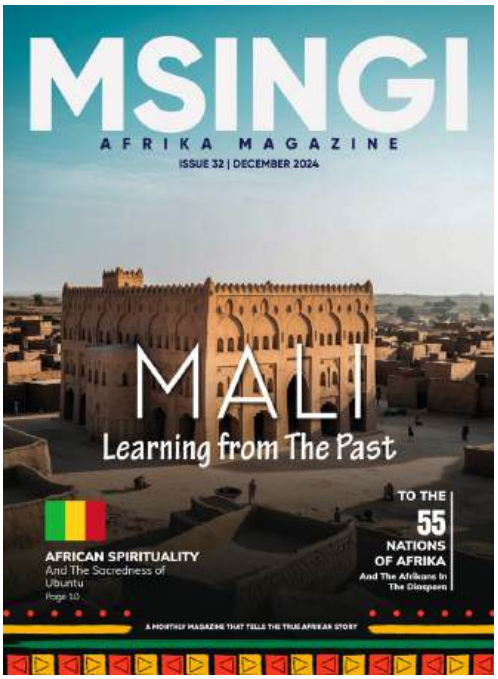
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LOVE AND AFFECTION OF SWAHILI WEDDING

I was gifted with an intricate floral kofia (Islamic cap) and adopted a Swahili name upon visiting the nearby mosque. I wore the kofia with a long-sleeve shirt and kanzu whenever I went to the mosque. Sometimes, I put on the kofia to protect my forehead from the scorching sun. I embraced my Swahili persona embellishing my body complexity, tall, slim, and light skin. Occasionally, I liked to clad the kofia with a favorite football jersey, especially when Arsenal won against Manchester United in the Arsenal Premier League.

I spoke slowly like a native Lamu speaker, but my speech deficiency filled many eyes with tears of laughter. I also chose my words carefully often finishing with an English

sentence to bridge the speech deficiency. I had the wonderful opportunity to visit my friends at Jumba la Swahili, where I enjoyed a delicious meal of samaki ya kupaka (succulent fish cooked in a rich coconut sauce) and biryani (a fragrant rice dish full of spices).

Most of the time young boys riding donkeys offered me a free ride through the bustling narrow path of Lamu town. I exchanged "As-Salaam Alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh" greetings with men in kanzu and women in buibui. A phrase that solidifies a sense of Islam religious affiliation.

In the morning, I enjoyed strolling along the beach testing kahawa tungu (a robust coffee). During lunchtime, I made my way to delicious aromas at Mama Rukia's Swahili dishes.

In the evening, I found solace in the nearby mosque for prayers. Then, walked through the dark vichochoro unmasking ladies in hijab dresses. I rounded up my night at Mkunguni (Lamu Square) where we gathered to soak in local and international politics. Mkunguini was an animated assembly with vitriol push of those who understood politics. The arguments were a reminder of the spirit of Bunge la Wanainchi in Jacaranda, Nairobi.

I come across a popular man at Mkunguni known as Sir. Mwenzangu. He seems a humble and polite man but people know him as a malicious and scheming person. He spoke with the confidence of someone well-versed in both local and global politics. It was rumored that he was a deportee for overstaying his visa in a foreign country.

Sir. Mwenzangu was a man of vitriol argument and he was never defeated in any cross-exchanges. He emerged victorious in any altercation. He was too a shrewd man serving as a senior officer at county government. Sir. Mwenzangu valued my contributions and occasionally mistook me for famous figures like Nuru Okanga and Babu Owino. The man was fond of highlighting my eloquence in public with enthusiastic applause. One day, a stone struck my ear, and within a second another stone hit my kofia.

Everyone took to their heels in different directions. I covered my head under scattered bench. I saw a shadow of a boy in kofia disappearing like a rat running towards its' hideout. I vividly recall someone constantly interjecting my speech with abusive words like mkafiri! kaongo!, kasongo! (a liar outsider). I tried to locate the voice from the crowd, but it was camouflaged by a crowd of Islamic attire.

I had energized the crowd

in support of an impeachment of a senior officer. In the following meeting, I was cautious of my discussion. I gave more weight to issues that resonated with the crowd such as opposing LGBTQ rights, condemning divorces and single parenting. The crowds were at peace with my subject of discussions. I learned that family were cultural threads of Swahili culture.

"Allah Hu Akbar" alarmed the people of the Lamu island for the evening prayer. The man cleared his throat and said, "matangazo za nikah" (wedding announcement). He announced an upcoming wedding at the mosque and grand wedding reception at Mkunguni. I phoned Mr. Satan to confirm those teenagers flirting at kichochoro were indeed planning to get married. They had already expressed their intentions to kutangaza nia (propose), and their parents had approved the union.

I was excited to gatecrash the nikah event at the mosque and the walimah (wedding reception) at Mkunguni. That night, l tried to sleep but my anxiety would not let me close eyes. I reclined on my bed, anxious to attend the nikah ceremony. I woke up at dawn, ironed crisp white kanzu, and cleaned my kofia. It had some spots of stone marks.

The morning atmosphere was filled with the rhythms of drumbeats, lively laughter, and the stampede of people. I quickly put on the kanzu and I joined the colorful procession of drumbeat.

A vibrant throng of children and women danced joyfully to the pulsating drumbeats. They traversed the vichochoros to the mosque. I followed them closely minding my identity as mkafiri (an outsider). I elusively took a back position to catch a glimpse of nikah event at the mosque.

The bride was radiating with a beautiful purple garment. Her arms and legs were embellished with 'piko' and 'henna' (body decoration). Her nose, ears, and neck were sparkling with jewelry. Her face was glowing like polished sand and her eyes were glittering like diamonds. She was surrounded by her family. The boy was standing on the opposite side clad in the royal regalia of the Sultan of Oman attire.

When l stretched my neck over the crowd, Aha! It was the boy who stoned me at Mkunguni. I was shocked the boy was accompanied by Sir. Mwenzangu. He

was his biological father. I remembered a shadow of a boy in kofia disappearing like a rat. I wanted to spring out and accuse the boy of attempting murder. On the other hand, I feared Sir. Mwenzangu would call me mkafiri. I knew my accusation would not stop nikah ceremony. They had already completed kisomo and kupeana stages of pre-wedding ceremony.

I watched the Imam standing between them adorned in Islamic attire and kofia. He read some Arabic words from the Quran, which was repeated many times by the boy and his bride. Finally, they were served with halwa, kahawa tungu, and kipande cha mbuzi (morsels of goat meat). At the end of nikah ceremony, the Imam did not declare the couples as newlyweds. The bride was expected to graduate to kitanda cha ushutu (a bed for a pregnant mother) and bembeya (a bed for a nursing newborn baby). Nursing a baby was a sign of family commitment in Swahili culture.

After a successful nikah ceremony, the siwa (it is a big horn blown during special occasions like weddings) thundered through the air and punctuated by the melodious call from the nearby mosque's loudspeaker. The rhythms of drumbeats charged an atmosphere with celebratory jubilation. Women busted into ululations shouting "Walimah tunayo sasa!" (we have the wedding). The colorful procession swiftly made its way toward the Mkunguni grounds. The couples joined the jubilant procession drumbeats. Although reception was a short distance from the mosque, the lively procession transformed the journey into a delightful adventure of approximately ten kilometers.

Upon reaching the Mkunguni grounds, the procession was greeted by a breathtaking jubilation of attendance. The reception was beautifully designed like a king's palace. They were arrays of vibrant colors of green, purple, and the fragrance smell of Udi.

The guests and families gathered under a canopy of colorful fabric tents. The boy and his stunning bride lighted up the reception with joyful smiles. Men sat on the baraza (a raised cement floor for relaxing), and some slid against the adjacent walls. Women sat on the floor in glittering buibuis and sparkling jewelry on their necks. Young ladies without hijabs were swaying their backs and hairstyles to the rhythms of ngoma za vugu

(wedding dance). I watched from a distance and remembered the hijab lady in Lamu Tamu Express.

Suddenly, a man leaped from the crowd and violently grabbed a chubby woman at her back. They both tumbled to the ground and everyone laughed on top of their voices. Some sympathetic woman screamed and ran to rescue the chubby woman on the ground. Two men violently pulled the man off the woman and punched him up. This time, the chubby woman was struggling to regain her composure. Her face flushed with anger and pointed an index finger at his eyes, "Shika adabu!" (have respect). She agitated, "We nitakufinya!" (I will pinch you). Everyone laughed again.

The chubby woman stood up and continued to sway her back to the rhythm of ngoma za vugu. At one point, the chubby woman woven tales of romantic mashairi (poems) to the couples. Her words were rich in seductive Swahili phrases that underscored the essence of love in marriage.

The hearts of the men and women were filled with awes of love and affection. The atmosphere breezed with aromas smell of Swahili dishes such as chakula cha mkono (a traditional Swahili feast for weddings), mikate ya sinia (fragrant biryani), vitumbua (crispy), sambusa (samosas), pilau, and kuku wa kupaka (coconut chicken). I swiftly made my way to indulged in biryani, and vitumbua that were passed to the men. Laughter echoed through the air mixed with jovial tales and hilarious gossip about the chubby woman. Everyone laughed loudly. The event ended with melodious sounds of taarab music composed by renown poet; Ali Bin Ali. I watched the couples dancing while cuddling each other to a swift rhythm of taarab melodies. They were shimmering in romance and their face were radiating a bright future.

The Swahili weddings are among the most celebrated and esteemed culture in East Africa. The culture is deeply rooted in Islam religion and Swahili traditions.

Swahili marriage shares similarities with Arab, Persian, and Hindu customs. The marriage factor issues like blood relations, religion, tribal affiliations, wealth affluent, and less privileged. Social status is taken very seriously by both families during kuposa (proposal), kisomo (pre-wedding prayers), and kupeana (exchange of gifts or dowry). The engagement starts with lively celebrations that feature vibrant Swahili drumbeats, dances, and music. A wide variety of Swahili dishes and cuisine are served during kisomo, kupeana, and walimah (the wedding feast). Upon agreement of marriage, the groom presents the dowry to the bride's family which may include money or furniture. The wedding festivities start with the nikah ceremony (marriage contract at the mosque) and end with walimah event (grand ceremony at an open field). The newborn baby signifies the formal union of the Swahili marriage.

DECLAIMER:
The writer is not an expert or a scholar in culture especially Swahili culture. It is possible to miss the facts about Swahili wedding events or misinterpret the truth about Swahili marriage.

THE SHENANIGANS OF LAMU ISLAND FESTIVAL

I bumped into another hijab lady in a reflector jacket written "Usalama" (security). She created a soprano noise broadcasting, "Chunga Usalama Wako" (mind your safety). She was accompanied by a group of young boys rumbling drumbeats. The sounds of drumbeat were so loud to the point they scared donkeys carrying crates of sodas. The donkeys stampede in different directions leaving broken crates of sodas and coconut brew.

The Lamu festival united long-term friends, unconscious enemies, determined fouls, distant relatives, and unlikable neighbors. It was also a memorable moment when a man would touch the head of the snake without a deadly bite. The drummers dressed in white kanzus chanted, "Sherehe ni leo, "Sherehe imefika." (welcome visitors). Others dressed in traditional African attire shouted in unison "Lamu tamu! Karibuni wageni" (enjoy the Lamu).

The elderly wrapped themselves in kikoi and strolled along the seashore chorusing, "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, La ilaha illa Llahu. Wa Llahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar wa lillahi l-hamd." (Allah is the greatest, Allah is the greatest, there is no god but Allah. And Allah is the greatest, Allah is the greatest, and to Allah belongs all praise). Other

men and women in black and white outfits written "Sherehe Kisiwani" were moving from one household to another. They were distributing small placards written in the Arabic language with symbols of the Lamu eye and accompanied by children reciting, "La ilaha illa Llahu. Wa Llahu Akbar" (There is no god but Allah. And Allah is the greatest). Children chorused along vichochoros (narrow path) , "As-salaam Alaikum Karibu Wageni" (peace with you welcome visitors).

They were young girls in deras (long dresses) breaking their backs with electrified dance to ngoma za kirumbizi (Swahili drumbeats). Women in khangas', lesos', and buibuis joined young girls and left the crowd with showers of claps. Young husband carried their children high on their shoulders to catch a glimpse of ngoma za kirumbizi. Some elderly men in kanzus pipped through the cracking walls shaking their heads gently to the drumbeats. Women in hijab were taking selfies around the famous UNESCO sites.
The drama continued when a bald man in buggy trouser raised a sharp machete shouting, "hatutaki washarati", "washenzi nyinyi" (Fools we desist lesbian). He threatened to butcher foreign lesbians misbehaving openly at Mkunguni. Suddenly, a police officer sprang from the crowd and pointed the guns at machete man's head. The drumbeats stopped and the crowd wailed loudly. We scattered for our safety. The policeman pulled the trigger but the man dodged the bullet. He disappeared from Mkunguni into the air like a ghost. The act angered the spirit of Lamu Island.

The week became alive with vibrant noise echoing as far as Mogadishu in Somalia to Cape Town in South Africa. The cockcrow salute "Allahu Akbar!" was heard as far from east to west, north and south. The trumpet sound of siwa shook heavily the iconic architecture of Lamu lsland.

The sound vibration blended with the rhythm of ngoma za Siu, sharp echoes of mashiri, and the piercing sound of nzumari (flute). I stood at veranda to take a bath from the warmth reddish-orange rays of the sunrise. I saw the dhows marked with mapping flora motifs were gliding smoothly across the water with passengers on board. I wonder if l was watching a movie or reality show or an AI movie in TikTok. The crowd of young boys were floating and hanging on top of dhows haphazardly. The dhows sunk deeply in the middle of the deep sea and then resurfaced with the young men in a celebratory mood. People watched from a distance of the Island and responded with jubilation applause, blowing nzumari and chanting "Lamu Tamu! Karibu Lamu!" (Lamu is sweat welcome). Some women wailed calling their sons' names loudly. Their cries were valid because they were a potential feast for dangerous sea creatures like blue-ringed octopus, stonefish, cone snails, beaked sea snakes, pufferfish, flower urchins, and lionfish. Neither of the single young boy was hurt nor injured in the shenanigans at the deep sea.

I watched a group of young men confidently jumping over the deep sea like a log of coconut trees. Some boy emerged from the water skillfully riddling on the back of the tiger shark while raising the Jamaica flag. Everyone from the island celebrated with a shout of laughter. The shenanigans were so deadly like a fly following a corpse to the

grave.

I recalled my childhood in the village when I dived into a river and was bitten by a black snake. I also remember escaping the cruel jaws of a crocodile. I still carry the wounds on my neck and hands from deadly experiences in the waters. I came to learn that diving shenanigans were part of the Lamu festival competition. The diving competition was packaged with heavy monetary rewards. l also observed young boys playfully speeding boats with children laughing on board.

Other race boats approached the beach at high speed, dropping off passengers and leaving splashes off the waters. In one instance, the other boy lost control and his boat capsized in the deep sea. No one ran to rescue the drowning boy. Within a minute, the boy resurfaced skillfully from the sea, turned the boat, and sped off. The sky was hovering with noises of aircraft above the sky. The aircraft were seen frequently taking off from a nearby airstrip. Passengers were carrying luggage disembarking from docking ships at the Lamu port. A few dhows were floating on the calm sea with people scrolling and checking

messages on their phones. Some visitors answered their buzzing calls while others were escorted to their hotels.

There was a heavy presence of navy officers patrolling the sea. Troops of navy armed with guns were speeding their boats towards the vanishing forest of mangrove trees.

I bumped into another hijab lady in a reflector jacket written “Usalama” (security). She created a soprano noise broadcasting, “Chunga Usalama Wako” (mind your safety). She was accompanied by a group of young boys rumbling drumbeats. The sounds of drumbeat were so loud to the point they scared donkeys carrying crates of sodas. The donkeys stampede in different directions leaving broken crates of sodas and coconut brew. I followed the lady to the open field of Mkunguni. Indeed, whenever drum rumbles it must be accompanied by the dancer. The drumbeat persisted loudly until there was an electric crowd of people rushing to Mkunguni. Multitude of white and black people dressed in vibrant kanzus, kikoi, leso buibuis walking up and down talking in high tone. Some were quarreling along vichochoro reclaiming their spaces. Some stood upstairs in the nearby buildings to catch a glimpse of persistent drumbeats.

The women at Mkunguni displayed several tables of appetizing burnt cakes, acharis (cookies), donuts, samosas, homemade chocolates, mkate wa

sinia, and roasted goat meat. A crowd of visitors stood at the tents to enjoy kahawa tungu, and chai ya mwarabu. Everyone was sweating heavily and funning themselves with newspapers. They simply grabbed barafu ya mkwaju (cold baobao fruit juice) to cool body temperatures.

Unexpectedly, a ball from nowhere knocked the table full of mkate wa sinia (burnt cake). It all scattered on the ground. The Swahili lady quickly picked pieces of mkate wa sinia from ground. Then his son picked them from the plate and dropped on his mouth. The boy caught my eyes and offered a piece of mkate wa sinia. I smiled back and dropped a piece of in my mouth too. Suddenly, his mother sprang up furiously holding a plate of mkate wa sinia, and knocked my head. She demanded payment for missing burnt cakes. I quickly reached into my pocket and pulled out a dollar to avoid embarrassment. But the nagging woman held tightly my neck and threatened to drown me in the sea.

A muzungu (white man) standing behind me cooled the situation by gracious handing her ten dollars. The woman smiled and went back to bake more mkate wa sinia.

The afternoon was more liver than midday when the cripple would walk in the shining moon. The day concluded with the rumbling sounds of ngoma za siya (Swahili drumbeats) and the melodious sound of mzumari (Swahili flute). The visitors were loitering along the beaches of Lamu Island. They painted the island in a colourful lingering and underwear walking in pairs. Some were taking selfie photography against the sailing dhows. The sailing dhows gave a reflection of the sunset shadows of couples cuddling each other in the sea. The foreigners were half-naked on their hotels' rooftops reclining on their beds. The sound of broken glass and sexy laughter pierced the noisy evening.

A cloud of puffing smoke escaped from the windows of the hotels. Some visitor stretched their legs on the adjusted bed listening to soft melodious music. They shook their head gently to the drumbeats while shaking their bellies. Other visitors joined the men in white kanzu performing ngoma za barazani (Swahili music).

The evening was made bright by sparkling lights from hotels, restaurants, and county government public lights. It brightens the vichochoros to keep off the hovering thieves and rappers. The families and friends gathered at one-point feasting on the delicious Swahili dishes. An elderly in kanzus sat at one corner engaging in an endless conversation.

A mother in hijab holds their daughter's hands tightly in fear of foreign predators. Women and daughters of Lamu island were hawking at children with special attention. The naughty children were impatient running after men riding on the donkey. Some children were running after dhows and others were following the drummers.

Many horrified stories were reported of missing children without a trace. Small girls were left nursing pregnancy and husbands shed tears for losing their wives. That night ended with a mother wailing vociferously, My Son! My son!. His only son was helpless on a speeding boat heading to the northern part of Mogadishu.

Karibu Kenya

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Culture | History | Tourism

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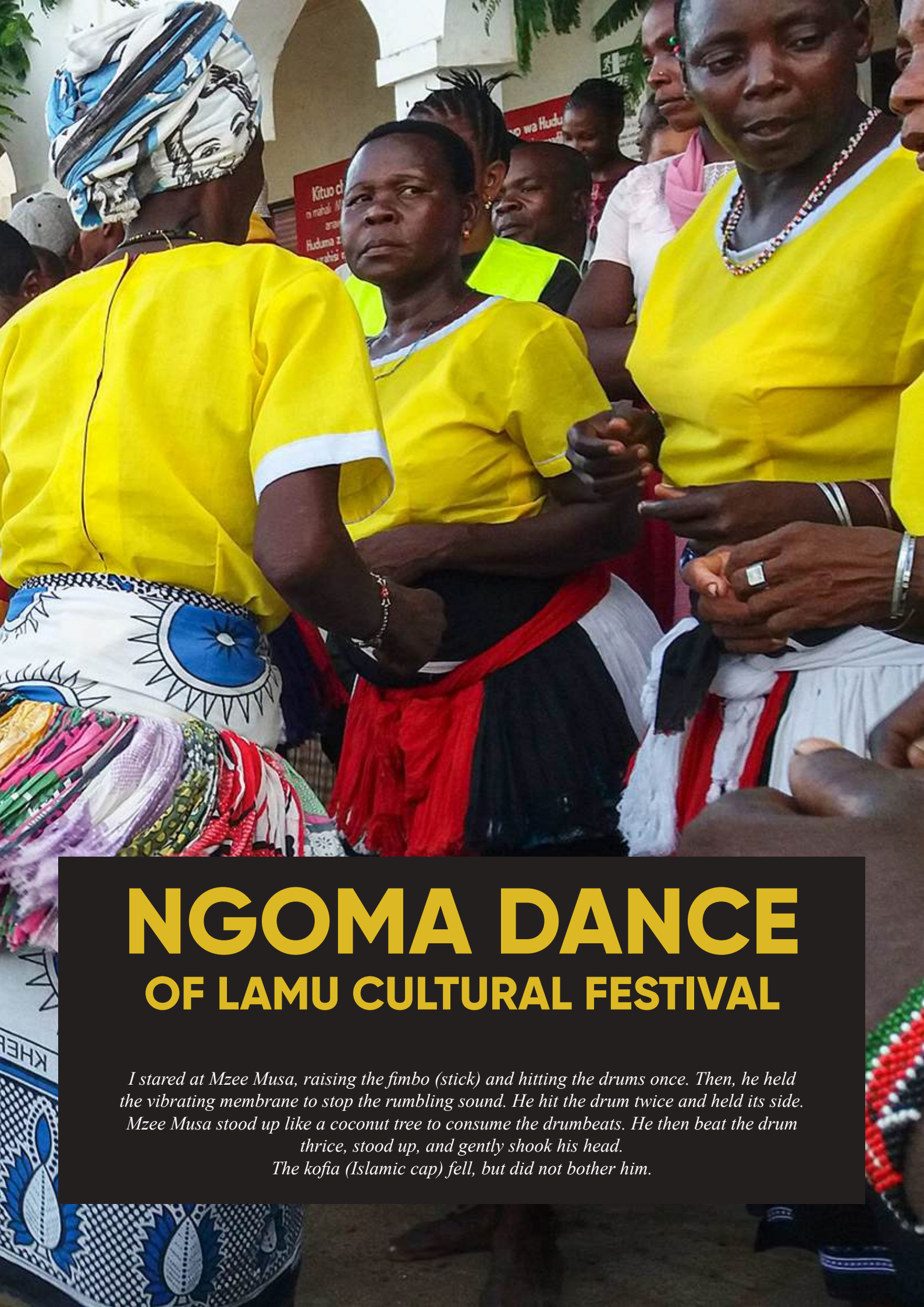
KARIBUNI LAMU!

PHOTO SPLASH

Welcome To Lamu The Island Of Festivals

RUNNING

TUMPE MUNGU SHUKRANI



NGOMA DANCE
OF LAMU CULTURAL FESTIVAL

I stared at Mzee Musa, raising the fimbo (stick) and hitting the drums once. Then, he held the vibrating membrane to stop the rumbling sound. He hit the drum twice and held its side. Mzee Musa stood up like a coconut tree to consume the drumbeats. He then beat the drum thrice, stood up, and gently shook his head.
The kofia (Islamic cap) fell, but did not bother him.

Mzee Musa never minded broadcasting his drumming expertise before haters, foes, and cheerleaders in the vichochoro of the old town of Lamu (pathways). In his absence, hatemongers gossiped about his bragging exhibits at the open square of Mkunguni. The one who cannot dance says the drum is bad.

He was a prolific drummer admired by many people on the Island. He belonged to the most classical Swahili band that entertained people in Lamu County.

I stared at Mzee Musa, raising the fimbo (stick) and hitting the drums once. Then, he held the vibrating membrane to stop the rumbling sound. He hit the drum twice and held its side. Mzee Musa stood up like a coconut tree to consume the drumbeats. He then beat the drum thrice, stood up, and gently shook his head. The kofia (Islamic cap) fell, but did not bother him. The sound of the nzumari (flute) and siwa (Swahili traditional horn blow) pierced through the silent atmosphere. The melodious sound was swift like a shark on the waters of the deep sea. The dancers in intricate floral kofias stood in a straight line looking up to Allah. The deep silence of the drumbeat meant that Allah was receiving daily invocations. Mzee Musa picked up the kofia and vibrated the drum at a high tempo until I blocked my ears with my fingers.

Other band members followed Mzee Musa's drumbeats simultaneously, and dancers consumed the vibrating rhythms in silence. The young girls in deras (long, free-flowing dresses) broke their backs with electrified ngoma dance (Swahili drumbeats dance of Lamu Island). Women in khangas, lesos, and buibuis joined young girls and shouted "oyaa yee!, oyaa yee! (religious ritual chant). Snakes, lizards, cockroaches, and bats emerged from the cracking walls of the vichochoro. They made their way to the band singing, oyaa yee!, oyaa yee!" The band was comprised of old and young men dressed in kikoi and kanzu. Young men blew nzumari and siwa skillfully. They had the energy to puff the nzumari and siwa through their lungs loudly. The old men concentrated on beating the drums. For over seven decades, the band was known for producing melodious sounds harmonized with local instruments such as ngoma (drums), uta (bow), kayamba (shakers), and nzumari. Mzee Musa was the lead member of the Lamu Musical Band.

The ngoma dance attracted the intrusion of cockroaches, shaking their legs and shedding off their wings. A bed of snakes lay flat on the waterfront, shedding off beautiful scales. Lizards dropped their tails while

shaking their bellies. A cast of crabs abandoned their shells to the ngoma dance. Snakes, lizards, and crabs (dangerous creatures) suffered no harm from their environment. The cockroaches were not a feast for the snakes, and the snakes were not a feast for the tourists. Rats were not hunted by a stray clowder of cats. Crabs despised the African proverb; do not go where the harvest is plentiful.

They willingly made their way to the Swahili food at Mama Rukia's dishes. Her beautiful daughter harvested crabs and prepared a Swahili meal for Mzee Musa's band. It was also an evening meal for visitors and foreigners at the Lamu hotels.

I remember my grandmother harvesting flying termites during the rainy season. My uncle lured the termites with drumbeats, and filled plates, sufuria (cooking pots), and spoons (traditional utensils). My uncle's wife would dry termites in the sun and roast them on a dry karai. In the evening, my younger sister would go to sell the roasted termites along the road leading to the city.

There was another group of male dancers dressed in white kanzus (traditional garments). They paraded themselves along the waterfront of Lamu Island, holding bakora (traditional staffs). The men draped themselves with orange handkerchiefs. They placed their bakora gently on their shoulders to the rhythm of the drumbeats. The chama (main conductor, like a choir) lifted his bakora for two minutes, listening to the drumbeats before placing it back. The men in white kanzu imitated the chama action. They neither shout nor chant any words. They did not call out "Allahu Akbar" or chant "oyaa yee! oyaa yee!" Instead, they absorbed the rhythms of the drumbeats in silence with bakora on their shoulders.

The men in the parade behaved like military men, honoring their commanders. This was another ngoma dance known as ngoma la barani (an esteemed male Swahili dance). .

The chama emerged from the parade holding a red handkerchief. He danced, moving up and down, raising the handkerchief slowly to the drumbeat. He gracefully approached Mzee Musa and removed his kofia. He wiped his rainy sweat. Then he moved through

the dancers in the parade and playfully touched their noses, eyes, and ears. At one time, he embraced each of them by their shoulders. He congratulated each man for the melodious drumbeats.

He shook his head gently to the drumbeats and raised a red handkerchief. He moved to one of them courteously and adjusted their bakoras gently. Then he rushed to the instrumentalists, smiling to the rhythm of the drumbeats. He raised the red handkerchief to increase the tempo. The chama shook his head in sync with the swift rhythms of drumbeats. Suddenly, he spotted a renowned politician dressed in a white kanzu. He pretended not to see him and swiftly moved aside. He playfully struck the politician with a bakora on his shoulder thrice. It was too late for his bodyguard to neuturalize the strokes of bakora.

The crowd was thrilled to see Hon. Omar bin Hussein (a popular politician) at the parade dancing to ngoma la barani. My attention was drawn to the charming chama and the authentic dancers who danced with Hon. Omar. Some of the crowd flocked towards the chama and removed his kofia. They placed a hundred dollar bill under his kofia. The chama raised a flag adorned with the symbol of the Lamu eye, and the people shouted, “sherehe ni leo!” “oyaa yee! oyaa yee! (We are celebrating today).

There was another group of women in buibui and hijab chanting anxiously, “Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, La ilaha illa Allah, Wa Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar wa lillahi l-hamd.” (Allah is the greatest; there is no god but Allah. Allah is the greatest, Allah is the greatest, and to Allah belongs all praise). They sounded soulful like children in Madras memorizing the words of the Quran at the mosque. They were nervous as they watched ngoma la kirumbizi dance in the open field of Mkunguni. The men were staging vicious mock sword fights while dancing rhythmically to the drumbeats. The chama was cheering the fights, moving red and orange handkerchiefs up and down.

The ngoma dances were performed outside the earliest Riyadha Mosque along the waterfront in the old town of Lamu Island. The mosque has been recognized for Maulid religious rituals since 1866 (Maulid is the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad). According to Swahili scholars and Muslim historians, the Riyadha mosque was founded by an Arab religious leader, Habib

Swaleh. He is celebrated for initiating the Maulid festival on Lamu Island.

If you visit Riyadha mosque on Lamu Island, you will see a composed portrait of Habib Swaleh dressed like Sultan Oman (a religious dress used to observe religious rituals). I was honored with a replica of his kofia as a gift. I was then baptized with his name, "Swaleh," at the mosque. We have over twenty mystical Swahili dances known as ngoma dances performed in the Swahili community. The ngoma dance safeguards the culture of Swahili. They are performed during the annual Lamu cultural festivals, Swahili weddings, and other significant celebrations like Maulid.

The notable ngoma dances include Ngoma la Lamu (from Lamu Island), Ngoma la Pate (from Pate Island), Ngoma la Siyu (from Siyu village), Uta (Bow), and Ngoma la Barani (from the mainland areas). Ngoma la barani is performed by twelve men who form two circles of ten. Ngoma la barani is led by the lead "chama." The dancers in white kanzu imitate the actions of chama. The ngoma la kirumbizi is known as ngoma la fimbo (stick) or ngoma la upanga (sword) in Kiswahili. The ngoma la kirumbizi features a group of men staging a mock fight with upanga (curved Arabic swords). We also have female ngoma dances, such as ngoma la lele mama and ngoma la vugo. The dances are performed mostly during wedding ceremonies. The dances present a group of women in leso or khanga shaking their backs to the drumbeats. The ngoma la lele mama and ngoma la vugo are accompanied by the blowing of the siwa to signify matrimonial rituals.

These ngoma dances have been performed for centuries. They are a reminder of the origin of the Swahili people of Lamu Island. Currently, there is an emphasis on the young generation of the Swahili community to perform the ngoma dances.

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Sherehe za Maulid ya Lamu 2022 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jG2i0saeu9s

Lamu Donkey Race

THE DONKEY RACE COMPETITION IN THE LAMU CULTURAL FESTIVAL

Any time the earth is tickled with a hoe, it laughs with a harvest. Abu, a one-eyed, stuttering young man, was announced the winner of the donkey race in the annual Lamu cultural festival. I cheered him at the top of my voice because he won against my enemy during my stay on Lamu Island.

Satan, a man I never quite understood, exhibited excited donkeys, cats, and dogs on his social media. His Instagram account Aswad Uhuru, was filled with images of donkeys chewing miraa (khat), and some were riding on a dhow. Satan and Abu had a deeper affection for donkeys than rubies. I recalled Satan greeting people cheerfully and patting the backs of the donkeys. The herd of donkeys raised their nose to smell his bald head. He rode on the backs of donkeys, accompanied by the clowder of cats and a pack of dogs. This animal offered a watchful eye to Satan even at night. Indeed, when you raise a leopard, don't be upset when it eats your goat.

I saw some donkeys tied in separate sections along the vichochoro of Lamu's old town. Some donkeys were hidden in dark corners listening to the rhythms of drumbeats from a nearby house. Young men were spotted reciting Quran texts to the donkeys.

Some old men in kikoi were feeding a herd of donkeys with natural herbs like hibiscus, string green, aloe vera, and turmeric. I watched some young girls dressed in hijab and buibui bathing a restless donkey in a pool of water.

The strange noises in the neighborhood never let me get a night's sleep. The night was filled with a noisy stampede of running donkeys, the low murmuring of the Arabic language, and the furious sound of whips landing on the donkeys. I trembled with fear and wet my shorts. I drew a basket under the bed and called for the short call. I then switched on the fan to cool my body.

Most Swahili houses have latrines located five meters away from the house. My house was noisy with the fan rotating, but the donkey grunting persisted louder. The whips landed on the body of the donkey like rain hitting the iron sheet roof. I reclined on my bed, with my stomach down. I turned right, rolled left, and eventually jumped out of bed at the loud sounds of donkey squealing, whiffling, and snorting.

I tiptoed six steps like a baboon toward my intricately designed door. I peeped through a cracked door to see what was happening outside at night. Gosh! I saw the familiar face lying on top of a donkey. The mouth was busy chewing gumbas (chewing gum), muguka, and miraa (khat). He held a bakora (a rod), fiercely beating the donkey while murmuring "ushike adabu" (have respect). The donkey was snorting in extreme pain. Upon noticing unusual movement towards my door, I quickly tightened my door with a large bar next to it. I went back to my bed feeling sympathy for the donkey.

The whipping inflicted muscle injuries on the head of the donkey and wounds on its back. I pondered on the word "ushike adabu" and wondered why the neighbors never came to rescue the donkey from inhumane acts. These thoughts lingered in my mind until today.

No sooner had I fallen asleep than I was awakened by the sound of "Allah Hu Akbar." A call for Morning Prayer at Friday Mosque. Within seconds, I heard a piercing whistle in the air. Initially, I thought there was a football match on my house wall-mounted television. Then I heard the stampede of a herd of donkeys running in a particular direction. I quickly woke up and ran to the veranda. I saw young people in kofias (Islamic hats) and their favorite football jerseys making their way in one direction. They were cheering a group of young men riding on a herd of donkeys. It was not cheering Arsenal winning against Manchester United at Emirates Stadium. The whistle blew again after two minutes, and a man shouted, "Mashindano," meaning "competition." The crowd erupted with jubilation for the upcoming donkey race competition. I quickly put on my favorite Arsenal football jersey, placed the camera on my neck, and joined the cheering crowd. It was the most exciting day.

The jockeys rested on the backs of a herd of donkeys, ready for the race competition. The donkeys were clad in white fabric emblazoned with symbols of Lamu eyes. They were marked with bold alphabetic letters to identify the donkey's owner. The jockeys wore differently colored T-shirts with their names written: Abu, Halifa, Omar, and others. On the back of their T-shirt, read "Lamu Tamu," followed by the italicized words "Utamaduni Kisiwani." The jockeys were composed, and their minds were fixed on winning the title race for the next phase.

The jockeys were instructed in Swahili to cover a distance of one thousand meters along the seafront. They were also told to race at least three to four rounds to qualify for the semi-final. The instructor emphasized the word "mchunjo" for semi-finalists to qualify for the finals. The instructor blew the whistle, and jockeys raced their donkeys at high speed like lightning striking the Columbus sky.

Only two jockeys qualified for the final competition. They both carried the title of the win, but it never meant they were both winners of the title that day. The sun was beating down on our foreheads, and everyone was pouring sweat heavily. The race had taken a healthy break, preparing for the Mothers of War battle. People flocked to the nearby binti barafu (a lady juice seller) to cool their bodies from the scorching sun. The atmosphere was filled with

confused murmurs from the defeated crowds on one side and jubilation from the winning crowd. The instructor blew the whistle to signal the final race. The jockeys were sure that the wind would not break a tree that bends. They were prepared for the challenges ahead and anticipated a victory.

Within an hour, a loudspeaker in the crowd shouted: "washindi" (final competition), and the instructor blew the final whistle. I looked for the best location where I would place my camera to capture the donkey race. I desired to have the best shot like a great photographer, Sir Samuel Phillips. So, I headed to a nearby building and set up my camera, ready to snap classic photos. Meanwhile, the crowd was swelling with cheering opponents. Suddenly, a naval officer in plain clothes brandished a gun at my head. I panicked, and my kofia fell down on the ground. l quickly pulled out my university badge, pretending to be an undercover police officer. He retrieved his gun and apologized, "pole Afisa" (sorry officer). He went on to clear the line to place my camera for the donkey race.

I focused my camera on the jockeys sitting on their donkeys, ready for the race. I spotted a familiar face. It was a young man who had been whipping the donkey all night. He was the same one-eyed, stuttering young man I met on my first visit to Lamu Island. His red t-shirt was printed with the bold letters "Abu." His donkey stood calmly waiting for a whistle to blow. The other contender was the son of Sir Mwenzangu. His white shirt was branded "Halifa." The boy who stoned me during a viral argument at Mkunguni. I quickly turned to the whistleblower. It was Sir Mwenzangu.

I zoomed out to capture crowds cheering, "Abu!, "Abu!". Other groups were chanting "Lamu Tamu!" while singing, oyaa yee oyaa yee!" and dancing to ngoma la Lamu (Swahili drumbeats). At that moment, a heavy troop of armed navy personnel pushed people aside to clear the path for the race. They were assisted by county security personnel dressed in reflective uniforms labeled "Usalama" (Security).

The whistle blew loudly, and the donkey began to growl and grunt. The jockey took off at the swiftness of a falcon. I quickly focused my camera and captured the donkey sprinting like an antelope chased by a leopard. I lost several shots of the jockeys

racing the donkey. My shots captured a county officer rushing to rescue a zombie loitering on the racing path. Within a minute, the jockey returned at high speed. I randomly photographed the jockey in action when Halifa's donkey came straight into the eye of the camera. I quickly turned the camera side. I narrowly avoided a violent kick from Halifa's donkey.

The crowd erupted in laughter when whistleblower Sir Mwenzangu rushed to rescue his son. Jockey Halifa was flying high in the sky like a kite and tumbled down on the ground like a sack. His donkey returned to charge him with furious kicks. He rose quickly in embarrassment and sped off towards the nearby mosque. Everyone cracked their ribs, and a woman wailed loudly, calling his name. I guess that was his newly wedded wife or his mother. Meanwhile, Abu emerged as the winner of the donkey race competition. His supporters chanted "Abu!" while carrying him high on their shoulders. They were singing, oyaa yee oyaa yee!" and dancing around him. The crowd made a procession to the organizers at the dais. Abu rode remorsefully alongside his donkey.

Abu was declared the winner of the Lamu cultural festival donkey race and presented with a prize worth US dollar $1,500 in cash. The organizers were drawn from UNESCO officials, the county government of Lamu, and local residents. They gave a speech praising Abu and the periodic organization of the Lamu cultural festival. They noted that the donkey race was among cultural competitions that preserve the unique culture of the Swahili community on Lamu Island.

The county government pledged to support Lamu cultural festival activities, such as the dhow and the donkey race competition. The National Agency for the Campaign against Drug Abuse (NACADA) also pledged to support the donkey race competition. The aim was to use donkey race competition to prevent men of Lamu Island from abusing ungas' (drugs such as bhang, heroin, and cocaine).

The Lamu Animal Welfare also cautioned young people to handle the donkeys with care. They requested the county government to tarmac the donkey paths with smooth and soft surfaces. They later presented Abu with a whip-proof jacket to protect the donkey from harsh whips.

Lamu Maktaba Ya Sanaa (LMYS)

Lamu Fort Library

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