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*THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CARVED DOORS OF MOMBASA  
AND THE EAST AFRICAN COAST  
IN TWO VOLUMES*

*BY*

*JUDITH SOPHIA ALDRICK*

*VOLUME I*

*THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF  
ARTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MLitt*

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*DATE: 1988*

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Elvet Hill  
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25 JUN 1990

*THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CARVED DOORS OF MOMBASA  
AND THE EAST AFRICAN COAST*

*by Judith Sophia Aldrick*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this work has been to research the 19th century carved wooden doors of the East African coast, with particular reference to those in Mombasa. Elaborate and impressive carved doors used to be a feature of many of the trading towns of the Indian Ocean Circle, but nowadays with modern living styles and new building techniques it is an art form that is dying out. The East African coast is one of the last places where these doors can still be seen in their original setting and where there is a door carving tradition that is continuing today. It is therefore a fitting place from where to base a research project on the subject. Door carving, although long recognised as an old and significant form of Islamic decorative art, has hitherto been little studied.

The thesis is divided into two parts. Volume I contains the written text and explanatory plates. Volume II contains separate photographic material.

VOLUME I

CHAPTER I gives a brief social history of the Swahili during the 19th and early 20th century in Mombasa and sets out the special problems encountered in dealing with Swahili culture.

CHAPTER II investigates the evidence for the existence of a carved door tradition and decorative style on the coast of East Africa before the 19th century. A brief outline history describes the period of

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## ABSTRACT

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early Islamic trading settlements, 11th - 15th century, and records their decline, 16th - 18th century.

CHAPTER III covers the Omani period in East Africa (c.1780-1870) when the Busaidi Sultanate of Oman extended and strengthened its control over the coast of East Africa and ushered in a new phase of Islamic settlement and expansion in the area. The doors of this period are described and discussed and sources for the designs suggested. Stylistic variations are noted and a possible dating sequence is given.

CHAPTER IV covers the later period (c.1870 - 1920) when, with increasing prosperity and international involvement, door carving on the coast of East Africa entered its most ornate phase based on styles brought from India.

CHAPTER V is a general chapter about door carving in East Africa, where the craftsmen, the woods used and the social importance of these doors are discussed.

THE SUMMARY contains the main conclusions reached.

Finally there is a GLOSSARY of the specialist and foreign terms used and a BIBLIOGRAPHY.

## VOLUME II

Consists of a photographic inventory of the carved doors in Old Town Mombasa. At the front there is a brief explanation of the organisation and purpose of the inventory. At the back there is a map of the town with the doors indicated.

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THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CARVED DOORS OF MOMBASA  
AND THE EAST AFRICAN COAST

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VOLUME I and II

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PHOTOGRAPHIC INVENTORY OF THE CARVED DOORS OF OLD TOWN MOMBASA

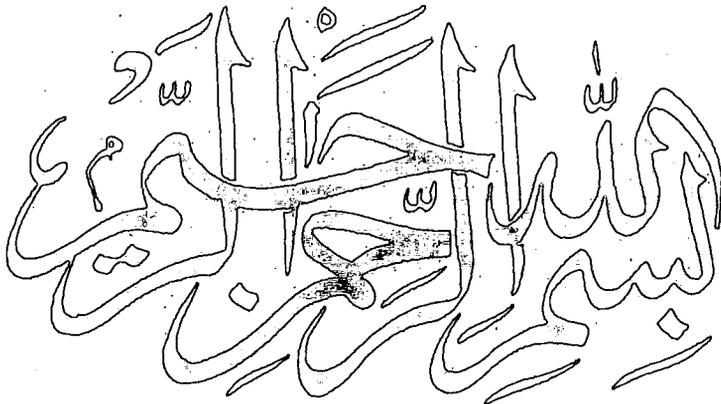
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THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CARVED DOORS OF MOMBASA  
AND THE EAST AFRICAN COAST

BY

JUDITH SOPHIA ALDRICK

VOLUME I



THE BASMALAH, WHICH OPENS ALMOST ALL OF THE  
CHAPTERS OF THE QURAN, IS OFTEN FOUND INSCRIBED ON THE DOORS

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N.B. Unless otherwise stated the photographs are copyright Friends of Fort Jesus Photographic Collection, P.O.Box 82412, Mombasa, Kenya, and were taken by Maurice Taffe in conjunction with the author.

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I would like to dedicate this work to the staff of Fort Jesus Museum, Mombasa and to the people of Old Town Mombasa, who have put up with my questions and curiosity with such patience, tolerance and courtesy. I hope that it will inspire them to further research and documentation of their cultural heritage. My special gratitude goes to Maurice Taffe, tireless photographer and colleague, with whom I have spent many hours photographing the doors and buildings in Lamu, Zanzibar and Mombasa and whose photographs included in this dissertation are just a small sample of his professional expertise and dedication. To Rosemary Macdonald go my chief thanks as it was she who first introduced me to the carved doors of the coast. It was she who pressed into my hands the unfinished research of Janet McCrae and inspired me with her own enthusiasm for coastal history and culture. I thank also Jim Allen, former curator of Lamu Museum and coastal historian, for allowing me to browse in his private library and for reading and commenting on my early attempts. Thanks also go to Fiona and Shajehan Khan and Dr John Sutton for their encouragement. I have had many interesting discussions with Ahmed Sheikh Nabhany, Swahili poet and scholar and with Dr Richard Wilding, archaeologist for the Kenya coast, to whom I am most grateful, primarily for introducing me to Dr G.R. Smith of Durham University, under whose guidance this dissertation was written. I also thank Ann de Montfort for her work in typing out this thesis.

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The Friends of Fort Jesus and the National Museums of Kenya under Richard Leakey, have provided me with valuable moral and financial support enabling Maurice Taffe and <sup>I</sup>~~me~~ to photograph the doors in Mombasa, Lamu and Zanzibar. These, together with the extensive photographs of the buildings in Old Town Mombasa will, it is hoped, form a nucleus for a photographic archive for Mombasa. Even as I write so much of what was photographed just five years ago has already disappeared. It was our aim to at least capture in photograph what could not be saved in the inexorable march of time and circumstance. This dissertation arose from a desire to write down the results of hours of field work and first hand experience in an area that is undergoing such intense pressures for change.

Judy Aldrick

MOMBASA

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This thesis is a study of the history and development of door carving along the East African coast and lays particular emphasis on providing a stylistic and historical analysis for the doors of Mombasa, which have not been studied or documented before. It has not been possible in this work to examine every door or piece of woodwork that exists in East Africa, let alone all the comparable examples that remain in other Islamic trading centres of the Indian Ocean littoral. The area of research is purposefully limited to the major centres of East African door carving, namely Lamu, Zanzibar and Mombasa and only the main strands of stylistic development have been identified. There are bound to be examples that fall outside a general classification exercise of this nature, but identification of the dominant themes must be the first step when one is confronted with large amounts of data that have not before been given a satisfactory sequence or system of organisation.

Very little has been written about door carving and woodwork of the East African coast. Much of my information therefore derives directly from a close examination of the doors themselves. During the course of this research I have catalogued and photographed approximately 500 carved doors from Lamu, Zanzibar, Mombasa, Gazi, Vanga and Takaungu and have studied photographs of those from Bagamoyo and Kilwa. I have looked at, for comparative purposes, as far as I can without actually being able to visit the areas, doors from Oman and Gujerat.

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One of the aims of this research has been to discover to what extent the 19th century carved doors of the Swahili coast were dependent on external influence and workmanship. For this reason I have asked myself the following questions. Are these doors peculiar to the Swahili and were they carved only in East Africa? Or could they have been imported and then later copied by Swahili carvers? Was the fashion for door carving first revived by the people of Siu and Lamu, inheritors of an unbroken Swahili tradition? Or on the contrary, is there evidence that local craftsmanship lapsed in the 18th century and was the 19th century revival due to a new influx of settlers and craftsmen bringing fashions from Oman and north-west India? Can the artistic flourishing of the 19th century be seen as a continuation of earlier styles or do the designs and styles break entirely from former traditions? Can the styles of decoration found on the coast of East Africa be put into a larger context of Islamic cultural history or should they be viewed as a localised Swahili development?

I decided that the doors are best understood as an extension and reflection of the history of the region and I have, therefore, included a general history, which is not separated from the survey of the doors. In an area where comparatively few substantiated documentary sources are available, material evidence has an added importance for the understanding of history. The doors, which in some instances are dated and inscribed, and in other cases known to have belonged to named individuals, are valuable sources of historical information in their own right. They add to our knowledge of social, economic and even political history of the area. My historical

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information therefore serves to complement the story told by the doors. In addition it is there as a guide for those who are not familiar with East African coastal history. It is not intended to be fully comprehensive or exhaustive. The main sources used are those standard histories included in the bibliography. As I do not aim to do more than summarise the main events and provide perspective, I have felt myself justified in keeping references to a minimum.

In the interests of brevity and, I hope, clarity I have tried to avoid complexities and controversies that might obscure the central theme. The view is taken that the most obvious and simple explanations are often the most likely.

There is bound to be a certain amount of personal selectivity, especially at points in history where no definite conclusion has yet been reached and where there are varying interpretations. I have therefore presumed that the Shirazi, as their name suggests, did originate from Persia and have ignored the confusing problem of mythical Shungwaya, which seems for my purpose a 'red herring'. In similar fashion, I suggest that the reason for the decline of the Swahili towns in the 17th century is due to changes of trade patterns in the Indian Ocean, and do not mention the hinterland drought theory, which though a possible contributory factor is felt to be not directly relevant. The late 18th century is another period of East African coastal history which does not emerge clearly from a reading of available sources and here again I have allowed myself a certain extent of interpretative leeway.

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I have not stressed the African quality of these doors or dwelt on the instances of deliberate asymmetry thought for some reason to be peculiarly African. This is because in my view most East African carved doors fall outside the field of 'African Arts' and belong to Islamic art. Furthermore in my opinion the asymmetry, as seen in doors, is generally caused by the lack of mechanical tools rather than an inherent cultural tendency. I also do not subscribe to the idea that the motifs on the doors show religious or tribal symbolism.

Lastly mention should be made of spelling and use of Swahili and Arabic terms and names. It has to be remembered that the Swahili language has only recently been standardized in written form and before the beginning of the 20th century was largely an oral language. Although Swahili has many words in common with, or that derive from, Arabic, and was even written in Arabic script, it is a Bantu language which contains words of Portuguese and Hindustani derivation as well, and is commonly today written in the roman script. It was first written down in this form by travellers and missionaries in the 19th century, who used a phonetic spelling which did not always correspond with that used by transcribers from Arabic in other countries.

The authors of the 19th and early 20th centuries describing life on the coast of East Africa with no set rules of spelling to follow spelt according to their taste and inclination and, as a result, various anomalies, especially in the spelling of proper names and archaic terms, crept into common usage. Thus even in the more recent literature of the area one can still find many inconsistencies of

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spelling, which is confusing for the student. One sees, for example, Shikeli (Pouwels), Shikely (Kindy), Sayyid (Pouwels), Seyyid (Abdulaziz) and Muhammad (Hinawy), Mohammed (Salim), Muhammed (Kirkman). There is a tendency to Anglicise surnames and Busaidy rather than Busaidi is often seen and 'e's and 'a's tend to be interchangeable - see Beit el-Ajaib or Bait al-Ajaib. But as a general rule I have tried to favour an Arabic mode where the word or name is obviously Arabic and also in religious terminology have used Quran and qibla, rather than the Anglicised Koran and quibla. On the other hand I have used sheikh not shaykh and have used Anglicised plurals, thus sharifs not shurafa or ashraf. An English word is used wherever possible and where there is no suitable English equivalent the term is spelt as I have most commonly seen it spelt in the available literature. There is a glossary at the back of the dissertation to explain these terms and which also provides brief descriptions of the major communities and religious groupings mentioned and an explanation of some of the more unusual titles of officials in this part of the world.

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CHAPTER I

THE SWAHILI QUESTION

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INTRODUCTION

Swahili people and Swahili culture are difficult concepts to pinpoint because the people who called themselves Swahili in the 19th century saw themselves in a different light from those who call themselves Swahili today. There has been a redefinition caused by the political upheavals and social change experienced in the last hundred years.

One of the aims of recent local historians has been to create a special cultural identity for the Swahili. What originated as a geographical description of the Islamic settlements along a particular stretch of East African coast, gradually assumed a more grandiose proportion embracing the culture to be found there as well. From this it was but a short step to a claim for the existence of a totally independent Swahili culture that was neither African nor Arab.

Politics and history are never far away from each other and this view of things well suited the political climate of the times, when traditional ties between the coast of Africa and Arabia were loosening and the people of the Swahili coast were seeking to forge a separate identity for themselves.

Thus Allen in the 1970s can throw up his hands in metaphorical horror at Stigand's opening plate in his book The Land of Zinj, written in 1913, which is labelled a Persian Monastery and not a Lamu Mosque. (1) Stigand, a linguist who knew the Middle Eastern countries of the time well, had no doubt good reason to call it this and, if not, was, one imagines, reporting what he had been told. At the end of the 19th

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century a Persian connection was a good thing, while by the second half of the 20th century it no longer was. Persia as an area of land and a cultural entity no longer exists in the same form as it did in the 19th century. Other early European writers with less specialist knowledge, coming perhaps from the Indian colonial services, labelled the culture and peoples found on this coast more generally as Arab, and this too as a term, has suffered with changing political circumstances.

Much of the acrimony and confusion that exists today is due to misunderstanding in terminology and to a certain amount of political heckling by interested parties bringing in complications where none need to exist. At one time 'Arab' as a general descriptive term was used in much the same way as 'Islamic' is used nowadays. The casual Christian observers of the 19th century, whose descriptions of the East African coast are the main source for social and art history, tended to lump all the Muslim peoples under a general heading of 'Arab'. The carved doors tended to be described as Arab doors, if only because the owners were generally of Arab extraction and Muslims. Also it was known that similar doors were to be found in the Arabian ports of the Gulf area.

The Muslim settlements on the coast of East Africa resulted in a people often indistinguishable from their Bantu African neighbours, but their pride in their paternal lineage, which could be traced back to the original settler, and their religion set them apart. Rich Swahilis took great pains to marry their daughters to visiting Arab

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traders. A fair complexion and an aquiline nose were features much admired as evidence of Arab forbears and good birth; in practice such looks gave patrician status to ones family. (2)

Complications of terminology - who might call himself an Arab and who might not - arose only from the late 19th century when, under Zanzibar rule, there arrived a new influx of Islamic peoples, mainly from Hadramawt and Oman, who tended not to integrate and who set themselves apart. This brought about a strange situation whereby there were three overlapping tiers of Islamic settler elements in Mombasa. The oldest Muslim inhabitants had banded themselves together into a loose confederation known as the twelve tribes and called themselves Swahili, or sometimes Shirazi. Secondly, there were the families who had come with the Mazrui from Oman at the beginning of the 18th century and had overthrown the Portuguese, who now styled themselves the 'old' families. Finally there were the 'new' families who had arrived more recently since Zanzibari rule, when the Mazrui and their followers had, in turn, been ousted. Most of the 'old' families were well integrated and had intermarried with the Swahilis and had even adopted the Sunni Shafi'ite teaching of the Kenya coast, but unlike the Swahili they had not lost all family ties with Oman or their country of origin. With the advent of the British who ruled over Mombasa and the Coastal Strip on a rental agreement from the Sultan of Zanzibar, these social strata became more divided and politically charged.

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SOCIETY IN MOMBASA UNDER THE MAZRUI

At the beginning of the 19th century the main social distinction had come between the freeborn Arabs and high ranking Swahili, known as the waungwana, and the others, the watumwa, who had no pedigree. There was very little movement between the classes and social position was simply a matter of birthright.

The Swahili occupied a privileged position in Mombasa. Aside from the Swahili gentry, clan leaders and elders, there was a more lowly group who were artisans, fishermen, small plot-holders, etc. Along with Muyaka, the poet, the Swahili of the nine tribes occupied the mji wa kale, or old town of the Swahili which was now a suburb of mainly makuti roofed single storey dwellings that stood to the north of the walled gavana, the stone town of Mombasa. Gavana, which is thought to be a corruption of governo, meaning administrative centre, was occupied by the Arabs, the Indian merchants and the Swahilis of the three tribes, together with their domestic slaves. Life revolved around a system of patronage, every man of status had a great many hangers-on, who relied on him for their livelihood. Swahilis often took the position of foremen and acted as go-betweens in dealings with the African tribes. Later in the 19th century they were very successful as caravan leaders. Their secondary role to the Arabs, particularly in the slave trade, has left them with a somewhat tarnished reputation.

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Lt. Emery who lived in Mombasa for two years between 1824-26 recorded life there under the Mazrui governors. (3) His description is particularly interesting, as it is earlier than most other eyewitness accounts by Europeans, which occur mainly after 1840, by which time the Busaidi sultans were already in power in Zanzibar and had started their rebuilding and modernisation programmes. Mombasa in Emery's time was still an independent City State and the Swahilis, though impoverished, were its main citizens, far outnumbering the Mazrui Arabs whose position as rulers depended on maintaining good relations with the Swahilis.

He relates how the Mazrui governors, on their appointment, gave large sums of money to the leaders of each of the Swahili twelve tribes and how thereafter they were expected to donate lengths of cloth at the traditionally important Swahili ceremonies of weddings and funerals. (4) The Swahilis were much addicted to lavish celebrations and feasts, when poetry and dancing competitions were held and the governor, in addition, was expected to lay on the festivities for the main religious functions as well. A Mazrui governor in Mombasa appears to have acted rather like a munificent father figure. The whole relationship between overlord and subjects in a traditional Islamic society is perhaps nowadays rather difficult to comprehend, but certainly the Swahili people of Mombasa seem to have been well content to have been taken care of rather like specially favoured family members. It was only when the Mazrui leaders fell into financial and political difficulties that the relationship became strained.

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Living alongside the ruling class of Arabs and Swahili, who traditionally, by reason of their birth and status, did not indulge in manual labour, were the domestic slaves. Domestic slaves often held positions of considerable power in a household and led relatively easy and pleasant lives, and were often children of existing slaves who had been with the same family for generations. They were considered superior to those who worked on the land, who occupied a position much like the serfs of medieval Europe.

One has to remember that the Victorian ideals of hard work bringing its just rewards, personal freedom valued above luxury and virtue found in self help were concepts alien to this part of the world. Indeed one feels rather sorry for the slaves freed by the energetic Lt. Emery, who were put to work hewing steps out of solid rock for his private landing stage because, as Emery self-righteously puts it, he wished to give these men 'a practical knowledge of free industry'. (5) It is true that he paid them every Saturday night and organised them under a Swahili mason, but even so one suspects they might have preferred a life of less strenuous slavery on an Arab coconut plantation, and it was hardly surprising that the local citizens of Mombasa viewed his anti-slavery operations with extreme suspicion.

Also low on the social scale were the Indian merchants and money-lenders, known sometimes as Banyans. Banyan specifically refers to a Hindu caste of moneylenders, but in this part of the world the term was used more generally for Indian merchants and traders. Indeed the Swahili word for a shopkeeper is bania. During the 1820s they ran

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successful shops and businesses in Mombasa. The many financial commitments of the Mazrui governors left them heavily in debt to these Indian traders who, as a result, were not always kindly treated. Often they were imprisoned until the debt was waived or even, as a last resort, thrown into the sea. (6) The Mazrui in Mombasa and the Busaidi later in Zanzibar relied heavily on Indian financial expertise for funding their various projects and were not particular about overspending the budget. As British subjects, the Asian community in Mombasa came to Lt. Emery with all their complaints and his diary provides some fascinating insights into the problems encountered in everyday Mazrui Mombasa.

Living separately on the mainland apart from the Muslim citizens of Mombasa, were the coastal African tribes known then collectively as the Wanyika, who are nowadays called the Mijikenda. They had their own political systems and different traditions and customs. Treaties of friendship were concluded for trading purposes and the Mombasa businessmen depended on them for their lucrative trade in ivory, rhinoceros horn and slaves. When fighting broke out between rival factions, it was the tribesmen, fierce fighters, who supplied the militia. A successful alliance with one or more of the Wanyika tribes was often the deciding factor in a feud and each of the twelve tribes of the Swahili claimed historic and traditional affiliations with one or more of the nine tribes of the Nyika. (7)

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THE COLLAPSE OF ARAB RULE AND ITS EFFECT ON SWAHILI SOCIETY IN MOMBASA

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During the 19th century British influence gave increasing status to the Indian merchants and the anti-slavery agreements with the sultans of Zanzibar further upset the structure of society. It was, however, colonial rule that hastened the final destruction of the old social order.

In 1895, when the British East Africa Protectorate was proclaimed, the British promised by public announcement that all ancient customs would be allowed to continue, that the Islamic religion would remain, and that in legal cases 'between natives' the sharia would be followed. (8) However the former Arab/Swahili aristocracy of Mombasa soon recognised this as a hollow promise. They saw their former privileged position whittled away and an alien set of laws and practises set over their traditions, so that their leaders no longer held real power. The Swahilis in particular, complained that the sultan's liwali, who in Zanzibar days, they claimed, had acted more as a liaison officer between them and the sultan, had become a tyrant who did not listen to Swahili problems and did not allow them the extent of self-administration they were used to previously. (9) The African tribes and Asians who were not included as subjects of the sultan, came under a different system of British rules and regulations. It soon became apparent that these special privileges allowed to the Islamic subjects of the sultan were, in fact, disadvantageous.

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In addition, the Swahilis felt strongly that the British government dealt more sympathetically with the Omani and Mazrui Arabs, who were given title to large tracts of land, which they often failed to capitalize, selling out at the earliest opportunity to Indian or foreign nationals and squandering the ready money. Unfortunately the twelve tribes, the oldest group, did not formulate their claims in a way understandable to a western adjudicator and they came off badly. When, in a final attempt, the Swahili put their case collectively before the Kenya Land Commission of 1932, they got nothing because, as the Chairman reported, "it seems to us that this is really a claim that you are sovereigns of this country and that the Sultan of Zanzibar has no claim to it and the rights he gave to the Government were not of any value." (10) Consequently the only land admitted by the British to belong to the twelve tribes was that in actual occupation or cultivation by individual members. The settlement of lands on the coast, even to this day, is a sensitive issue, especially as valuable plots are still under-utilised, belonging to absentee landlords, whose families have since returned to Arabia, while the Swahilis saw land, that they thought historically had been theirs, allotted elsewhere. After the revolution in Zanzibar in 1964, when the sultan was deposed, many Arabs who still had family connections in Oman returned there. Very few Omani families still live in Mombasa and virtually none in Zanzibar.

Another area of complaint was the unpopular levying of customs duties and taxes as part of the war effort after 1915. The Swahilis claimed that they were exempt from duties on exports and imports, and indeed,

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were entitled to a share of the customs revenue collected. To prove their point they produced treaties that had been made between the leaders of the three tribes and Seyyid Said, when the Mazrui had been overthrown in 1837 and which had been renewed by succeeding sultans. The wording of these treaties was extremely vague and dealt mainly with rights of self administration and legal controls, safeguarding the position of the Swahilis under a new overlord, but there was some kind of exemption clause on certain government dues included in the early treaties with the three tribes. It seems that this was actually payment for a deal set up between the three tribes and the Sultan of Zanzibar when the three tribes changed sides to support Seyyid Said in c.1835. It was their defection from the Mazrui that caused their overthrow in 1837, when Mombasa finally recognised Zanzibar rule. In the early days of British administration the Swahili chiefs had managed to persuade the bemused officials that this was an established custom and a sum of money was paid to the tamims of both the three and nine tribes representing their share of the customs revenue. This was suspended after 1915. (11) One of the many criticisms levelled at the Imperial British East Africa Company period of government in Mombasa was that they were too open-handed to begin with, acceding to all claims, valid or not, thus hoping to win over the people by generous gestures of gifts and money; this was in deliberate contrast to the Germans, who were attempting to rule by force in neighbouring German East Africa, but it led to problems once the giving season was over.

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The Swahilis began to feel disgruntled and unfairly treated, no longer content with their Arab representatives. Unfortunately the up-country Africans, who were organising themselves politically, were not anxious to include the Swahilis. So the Swahilis, who considered themselves the oldest and rightful inheritors of the coast, found themselves displaced persons outside the major groupings, with no say in the administration. As Muslims they also found difficulty in fitting into a Christian organised society and without education, wealth or position, the plight of the Swahilis was sad indeed. Even until recently poorer Swahili families were frightened to send their children to government schools, largely Christian orientated, while only the most fortunate managed entry to the one Arab school. The Coast Province of Kenya has one of the highest rates of adult illiteracy among men and women over the age of forty in the country.

Already impoverished by the anti-slavery laws and with very little land allotted to them, all traditional support systems were seemingly withdrawn. The final blow came in the late 1920s. The Coast Arab Association, founded in 1921 and run by Sheikh Rashid b. Soud Shikeli, who had close Mazrui connections, tried initially to create a better deal for the Swahilis, but his efforts came to nothing when the Coast Arabs voted to exclude the Swahili members of the twelve tribes from Arab status altogether. After this, great enmity arose between those who styled themselves Arabs and the Swahili members of the twelve tribes. In 1927 a political organisation called the Afro-Asian Society was founded. A member of this group, son of an elder of the Kilindini tribe, Hyder Kindy, later a politician and writer, was

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imprisoned in Fort Jesus in 1929 for his assault on a prominent Coast Arab, Sharif Abdalla, who had written a letter to the Mombasa Times denying that the Swahilis had any claim to call themselves Arabs. (12)

Nowadays most Swahilis have discarded their lineages and many cannot even remember to which of the twelve tribes they originally belonged, but still they say their forefathers were settlers from Arabia and the Gulf and consider themselves different from other African peoples. They still find it shaming to perform menial tasks and savour memories of the old Swahili gentleman who would not have worked for his living, but strolled about town clad in spotless white kanzu, long robe, and kofia, the embroidered Muslim cap, discussing world affairs with other menfolk of similar rank. They are the victims of a new social order and like impoverished gentlefolk of other nations, tend to exaggerate past importance and are sensitive to slights, intended or otherwise. They thrive in an atmosphere of ambiguity and what is known in Swahili as fitina, continuous intrigue.

This then is the background against which any historical discussion of Swahili and coastal culture must be viewed. Under the circumstances it is understandable why many Swahili do not like to hear the culture on this part of the coast referred to as 'Arab'. Their jealous claim to the authorship of the material culture of the coast and fierce wrangling over the origins of the Swahili people, stem from their feeling of a loss of position and special identity. Even to this day they cannot decide on which side to come down, claiming now that they are indigenous coastal Africans, and now that their forbears came from

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Shiraz and Arabia. The issue today centres more round the question of how African they are as, with a Government based in Nairobi, their position is still not favourable. This is especially as it has not been forgotten that they once claimed Arab status and in the 1960s moved for some kind of political autonomy for a Coastal State, known as mwambao. (13) The Mwambao Question is not entirely dead and political undercurrents are hard to avoid in discussing the Swahili. To advocates of a stable Africa, where boundaries should be maintained, even when not always ideal, the Swahili question is an embarrassing one as it seems to put forward the case for a fresh carving up of Africa. (14) The recent efforts by scholars such as Allen and Horton to justify the existence of an indigenous coastal African culture called Swahili, that is self-generating and not dependent on external influences, is part of a deliberate attempt to give the Swahili an honourable place in a new society, which is increasingly inwardly orientated and wants no outside interference.

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FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER I

1. Allen, (1973), 1
  2. There is an old Swahili saying 'waungwana walio na puande', meaning "the high born who have long noses."
  3. Gray, J. (1957) gives a full account of the Owen Protectorate and includes many excerpts from Emery's diary which was attached to the log of H.M.S. Barracouta, now P.R.O. Adm 51/3940, 52/3941
  4. Owen, (1833), 154, 5
  5. Gray, J. (1957), 105
  6. Gray, J. (1957), 131
  7. Abdulaziz, M.H. (1979), 32
  8. Mombasa Social Survey, 35
  9. Mombasa Social Survey, 92
  10. Mombasa Social Survey, 96
  11. Discussion of these treaties is included in Mombasa Social Survey, 82-94. The translation of the treaties made with the three tribes by Seyyid Said, is included in Kindy, H. (1972), Appendix A, 211-213, also 51-2
  12. Kindy, H. (1972), 26-45 and Abdalla, Sharif: Criminal Case No 1049, 1929, Mombasa
  13. Kindy, 184-91
  14. Mazrui, Ali A. (1986), 30
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CHAPTER II

*EARLY ISLAMIC TRADE AND SETTLEMENT  
ON THE EAST AFRICAN COAST: EVIDENCE  
FOR A TRADITIONAL DECORATIVE STYLE*

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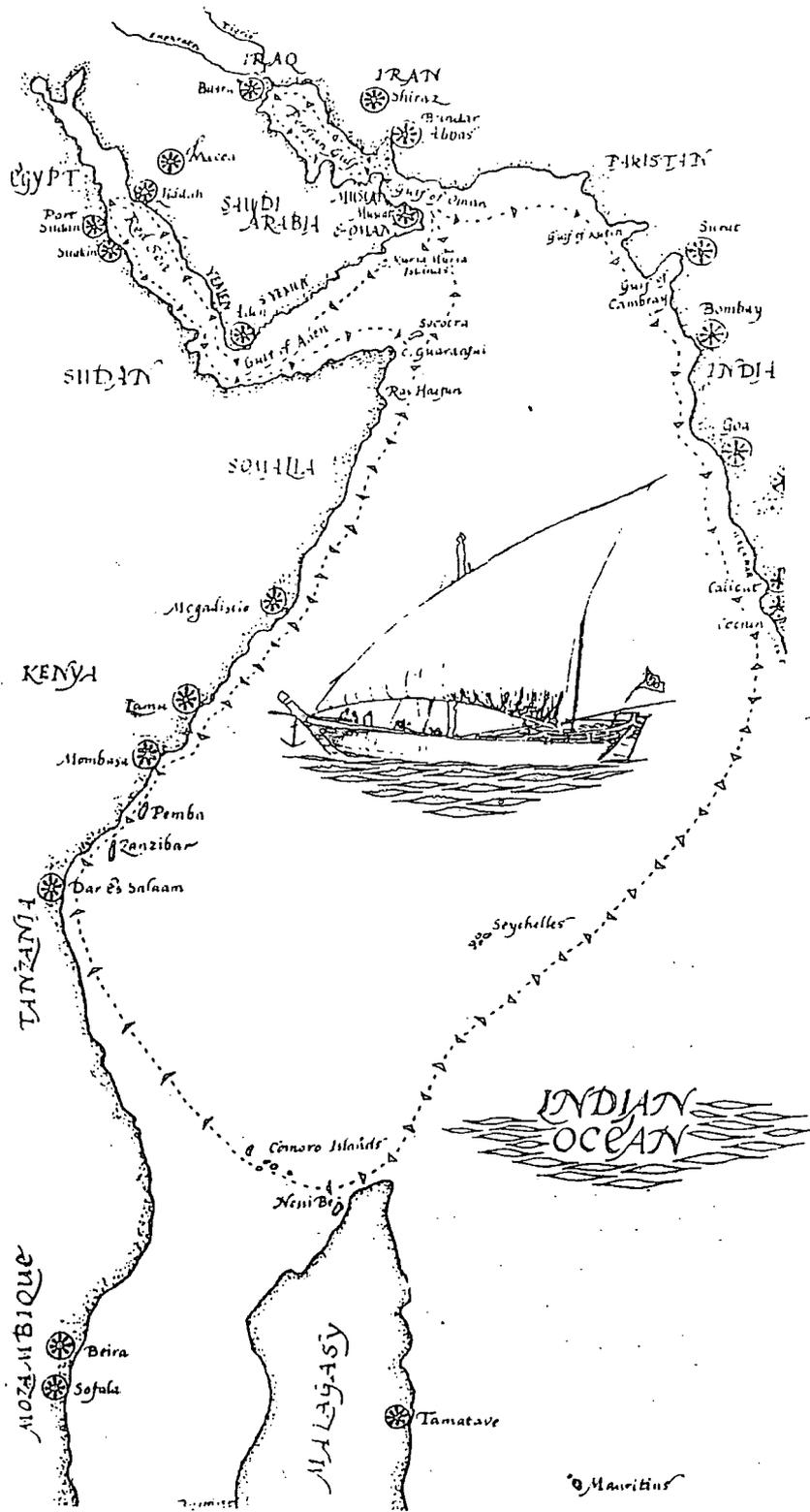
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INTRODUCTION

External carved wooden doors are a distinctive decorative feature of the coast of East Africa. Over 500 survive in Zanzibar, there are approximately 200 in Lamu and 100 in Mombasa, while a few can still be seen in the lesser towns of the area. Many of these doors are over 100 years old and bear testimony to the carpentry skills of the people and fine woods of these coastal regions. Although a few examples of similar doors can be seen in the old Arabian trading ports of the Red Sea and Gulf areas, as well as in the Sudan and Somalia and also in Goa and the Gujerati trading towns of the west coast of India, East Africa is the only place where they still exist in large numbers and where a continuing tradition of doorcarving is practised. The variety of styles express the tastes of a cosmopolitan people brought together by the trading requirements of their countries. Just as trade fluctuated and shifted with changing world markets, so did the styles of the doors change to meet different requirements and fashions. The doors of the Swahili coast represent a final flourishing of a very old artistic tradition that appears to have its roots in the dhow trade of the Indian Ocean circle. So close is the relationship that the same decoration appears on the trading ships as on the doors and it was the traders and ship owners who commissioned the doors. Nowadays the dhow trade from Arabia is almost extinct and the carved doors that used to symbolise a rich merchant's power and prestige are carved instead as a tourist curiosity.

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FIG. I



INDIAN OCEAN CIRCUIT PLIED BY DHOWS FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL  
(This map is reproduced courtesy of John Jewell)

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THE INDIAN OCEAN CIRCLE

The Indian Ocean circle is the name given to an area of Arab trading influence, which as early as the 9th century embraced the coastal regions of both sides of the upper Indian Ocean, west India and East Africa, with its lower limits touching the Seychelles and Comoro islands, just north of Madagascar. Arab trade extended up into the Gulf and into the Red Sea and even as far as Indonesia and China, but the Indian Ocean circle was the hub of activity for the Arab trading empire and the three way trade between Arabia, India and East Africa was central to its economy. The cotton goods from India were the standard articles used in barter, while the timber from East Africa was used in building the ships that travelled to Indonesia, Malaya and to China. The East African coast was convenient for both Arab and Indian traders. Blown down by the north-east monsoon winds, known in Swahili as the kasikazi, which begin in November and last until February, they returned with the south-west monsoon winds, called the kusi, which set in from late June until September. Between the two monsoons are periods of light winds called maleleji and demani before the long and short rains start. (1) Muscat and Oman lie opposite the Indian state of Gujerat and north-west Pakistan, which was once a province of Persia, and it was at the Kuria Muria islands, south of Ras al-Hadd, the most easterly point of the Arabian peninsula, that the dhows from these areas used to gather to wait for the north-east monsoon that would blow them directly to the coast of East Africa. (2) What now comprises the coast of Oman and the Yemen used to be known as

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Arabia Felix and it is not surprising to learn that many of the earliest visitors to East Africa came from these parts along with traders from Cutch, Cambay and Persia. (3)

It has recently been recognised that the material cultures found along the coastal regions of this circular trade route are interconnected and that the Islamic peoples who live there are the result of long trading relations with Arabia. This phenomenon of a coastal belt of trade-based peoples and culture is nowhere more apparent than on the east coast of Africa where the Islamic Swahili settlements are in striking contrast to those inland. (4)

#### WHY DID ARAB AND INDIAN TRADERS COME TO EAST AFRICA?

In the days before concrete, steel and oil, timber was one of the most important of all raw materials, needed in the construction of both houses and ships. The desert lands of the Arabian peninsular and Gulf areas lacked a plentiful supply of this basic commodity and had to import it. The most expensive and durable wood, teak, came from the Malabar coast of India, but equally good hardwoods came from the fertile coastlands of East Africa below the Horn of Somalia. Mangrove trees were there in abundance, which supplied the boriti poles, used for rafters and framework for houses and ships as well as scaffolding, for which they are still used today. Better quality wood was also available from the coastal forests. The coastlands could be cultivated to produce commodities needed to supply the trading ships and various types of grain, mainly rice and millet, were grown especially at Pemba and near Malindi. (5) Cotton was produced and

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grown at Mogadishu, and Mombasa was famous for its citrus fruits. (6) Gold, ivory, ambergris, rhinoceros horn and slaves were also exported. In return the merchants from Arabia offered mainly luxury and finished goods, silks, perfumes, damasks, ceramics, glassware, dates and dried fish. Traders from the Gulf and south Arabia came and settled to ensure supply of essential commodities and safeguard their trade. On the other hand the Indian traders had more to give to East Africa than they needed in return and thus had less of a reason to settle and colonise. India exchanged cloth, sugar, wheat, rice and cooking ghee for ivory, gold, copal gum (used in varnish) and wax. (7)

#### EARLY ISLAMIC SETTLERS ON THE EAST AFRICAN COAST

The coastline of East Africa is studded with the remains of ruined cities and smaller settlements, stone buildings that are evidence of a lost civilisation about which very little is known. Most of the sites appear to have been abandoned in the 17th century and their histories quickly forgotten. Nowadays archaeologists are trying to unravel a consistent chronology from the material evidence that survives. However there is still so much controversy as to when the various settlers first arrived, where they came from and what Islamic belief they held, that only the foolhardy or confident expert would venture to tread over such disputed ground. Nevertheless a general pattern does emerge.

The majority of the early settlers came from south Arabia and the Gulf areas. They came in groups and as individuals at different times and from different regions within the Arabian Peninsula and intermarried

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and integrated with the existing people, creating trading towns of a richly cosmopolitan mix. The inhabitants of these towns later became known as the Swahili, (8) or coastal dwellers, in order to differentiate them from the Nyika, who lived on the hinterland plains. It is interesting to see how many of the earliest Swahili settlements are situated on islands, separate from the mainland.

The only documentary sources are oral family and regional histories, which tend to be embellished and not entirely accurate, more concerned with tracing and establishing distinguished lineages than in describing actual historical events. The earliest and best known is the Kilwa Chronicle, which was first recorded by the Portuguese in the 16th century and also survives in an Arabic version, copied from a 16th century manuscript. (9) The history of Mombasa was written down in the early 19th century, (10) but most others were not recorded in written form until the 20th century. The fullest and most detailed history is that of Pate, which was told by Bwana Kitini of the Pate royal family to Captain Stigand and traces the fortunes of the Nabhani family right back to 1204 when they first arrived from Oman. (11) In some places the bias is obvious, and the importance of Pate has been much exaggerated, but the underlying narrative is based on fact. Other histories of towns and families survive which were learnt by heart and recited by official storytellers on special occasions and are a mixture of fact and fiction.

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THE SHIRAZI SETTLERS

The most well known settler group are the Shirazi which, literally translated, means people from Shiraz. (12) Shiraz still is a town in Iran, but in the 11th century it was the capital of the Persian province of Fars and a great centre of commerce. The Kilwa Chronicle relates a tale of how a certain Ali, son of Sultan Hasan of Shiraz, sailed to the coast of East Africa with his brothers in seven ships and founded settlements wherever they landed. Ali himself settled at Kilwa on land which he bought for a large number of coloured pieces of cloth. Coins minted with the name Ali b. Hasan have been found both at Kilwa and Pemba, dating possibly as early as c.1100, (13) whilst the son of a Muhammad al-Shirazi founded a mosque in Mogadishu in 1269, (14) traces of evidence that tend to support the Kilwa history. It is also possible that the floriated kufic inscription in the mosque at Kizimkazi, Zanzibar, dated 1107, which is the earliest inscription so far found in East Africa, is Shirazi. The inscription, which is more elaborate than those generally found later in East Africa, has been compared with inscriptions found in early mosques in Mogadishu and tomb inscriptions from Shiraz/Siraf. (15)

Mombasa, according to the Kilwa Chronicle, was settled by the fourth of Ali's brothers and Malindi, Pemba and Zanzibar were also Shirazi settlements. (16) The arrival of these enterprising merchants, who probably started off at Mogadishu and then moved down the coast establishing branch offices, did much to stimulate East African trade and the period 1100-1500 was a prosperous one.

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The Shirazis appear in history as sophisticated and commercially astute merchants, who were primarily interested in exploiting the gold and copper that had started to be mined inland in present day Zimbabwe and was being traded through the port of Sofala. To begin with large profits were made, as apparently the king at Sofala had little idea of the value of the gold and ivory he was exchanging for cloth and other items but later on, as the news spread, the trade became extremely competitive and Shirazi agents were kept in every port. Mogadishu, then Kilwa and finally Mombasa, controlled this trade and each in turn became the most powerful city in the area.

The commercial dominance of Shiraz and its port, Siraf, present day Bushire, declined and Hormuz, nearer the mouth of the Gulf, assumed more importance in the 14th and 15th centuries, but the Shirazi who had settled in East Africa continued to do extremely well for themselves. They often became the rulers of the trading towns where they operated and great rivalry sprang up between them as the towns competed for business and domination of the coastal trade.

The Shirazis were not the only successful settlers to arrive. By the 14th century control of Kilwa had passed to a sharifian family. (17) The sharifs from Hadramawt and the Yemen have a long tradition as merchants and travellers on the coast of East Africa. They claim direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad and as such were always much revered as holy men and scholars and were accorded the courtesy title sharif. Sunni Muslims, they follow the Shafi'i law school, which is predominant nowadays on the Swahili coast. Ibn Battuta gives one of

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the few eyewitness accounts of life in the East African towns before the arrival of the Portuguese. He called at Kilwa in 1331 and met with the ruler, Sultan Hasan, an extravagantly pious gentleman renowned for his generosity towards travellers and high respect for sharifs, a large number of whom lived in the town at his expense. Ibn Battuta much enjoyed his stay and praised the town, admiring the elegant woodwork and fine construction of the buildings. At Mombasa he paid a visit to a wooden mosque and was able to report that the inhabitants there too followed the Shafi'i rite, though he was less impressed by their hospitality. (18)

Other early traders came from Oman and a group settled in Pate. The original settlers of Lamu are said to have come from Damascus and the Yemen. (19) The Shirazis, however, seem to have left the greatest impression and it is with some justification that the years 1100-1500 along this coastline have been designated the Shirazi period. It is with pride that certain Swahili families still trace their ancestry back to the Shirazi settlers.

#### THE SHIRAZI STYLE: SOME COMMENTS ON THE ARTISTIC STYLES OF THE PERIOD

Shiraz, though its commercial importance declined, continued as a great cultural centre and was famous in the 15th century for its very fine miniature paintings which were distinguished by brilliant colours, naturalistic landscapes and trees, with bird and flower motifs drawn in the margins and borders. It is interesting that various Portuguese descriptions of Kilwa and Mombasa in the early 16th century, mention paintings on the plaster walls of the houses, though

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whether this actually refers to stucco work or a combination of both, is open to discussion. (20) Although carving work is never specifically mentioned, 11th century descriptions of Siraf, the port of Shiraz, make a point of describing the fine woodwork of the buildings made from wood brought from the Country of the Zanj, as East Africa was then called. (21) In a centre that was famous for its painters and woodwork, there must surely have been carvers as well.

One of the problems when studying wood carving is that it is not a durable art form and external woodwork is particularly vulnerable. While miniature paintings and grand stone porticoes survive in Islamic countries from early times, very little woodwork does. There are a few minbars of carved wood in mosques and the occasional panel of wood to be found in museums, dating from an early period, and one or two doors, from which one can surmise only that the decoration in wood followed the styles of Islamic ornament in other materials, particularly plasterwork, ceramic tilework and carved stonework. This is borne out by the wooden doors from the mosque of al-Azhar in Cairo presented by the Fatimid Imam, al-Hakim, in 1010, now in the Cairo museum, which are decorated with sparsely foliated tendrils set within rectangular panelling reminiscent of their stucco work in Cairo. The 12th century wooden door panels in the ethnographical museum at Konya are carved with a much more exuberant interlaced floral design set within an asymmetric pattern of shapes, which is also found in Seljuk sculpted portals in Turkey. (22) Unfortunately neither door shows any striking features in common with the later East African doors and in the absence of any known carved doors from Shiraz it is hard to make

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any meaningful stylistic comparisons. However it is evident that there was a tradition of carved wooden doors for mosques, and for the fortified warehouses called hans.

It is worth observing here that, in general, Persian styles and the later Perso-Indian styles favour foliate and floral patterns unlike the styles deriving from North Africa and Mamluk Egypt, which tend to be more geometric. This divergence between so-called 'Gulf' and 'Red Sea' styles becomes more marked in the 16th and 17th centuries with the emergence of the Cairene style in Egypt and a typical interlaced strapwork pattern called guilloche, which is seen particularly in Ethiopian and Somali art, while on the other side of the Indian ocean styles become more floral. Persian carpets were woven to look like rose gardens, not marble pavements like those in Egypt. (23) The Moghul emperors admired Persian styles of painting and art, which they introduced to India and developed further. Indian miniatures from Delhi relate closely to the 15th century Shirazi school of miniature painting and in India, from the 17th to 19th century, a Perso-Indian or 'Moghul style' was considered properly Islamic and superior to the art forms of the Hindu. It is this style that is also sometimes referred to as Shirazi.

There is a type of Persian carpet design that is still called Shirazi today and certain high quality chests with brasswork decorated with floral and foliate patterns are also called Shirazi. (24) The style

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however, has long outlived the place with which it was first connected and neither carpets nor chests are made nowadays at Shiraz.

The existence of this style of ornament called Shirazi has caused considerable confusion, as logically one would expect a Shirazi style to appear in a Shirazi settlement. However the ornamental remains from the early settlements on the Swahili coast show few signs of the floral and foliate arabesques made popular in Persia. The Kizimkazi inscription, which has foliate scroll work within the calligraphy, is an exception and is quite different from the later tomb inscriptions found in East Africa, which generally date from the 14th and 15th centuries.

It has been suggested that this is perhaps because the earlier Shirazi settlers built by preference in wood, and the stone buildings which have survived for archaeologists to investigate were built by other settlers with a stronger stone building tradition. The sharifs from Hadramawt exercised a very great influence over religion and culture in this part of the world, certainly between the 14th and 18th century, and they built generally in stone. It is quite likely that various types of building styles co-existed in these cosmopolitan coastal trading ports and a study of the remaining artefacts can only give a very partial view of what was there. (25)

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EVIDENCE FOR A DECORATIVE STYLE IN THE EARLY SETTLEMENTS

No decorative woodwork survives from the 1100-1500 period of settlement in East Africa and very little carved stone and coral decoration.

The earliest carved woodwork to survive are two minbars, one in Siu dated 1523-24 and one in Lamu dated 1511-12. (26) They are carved with inscriptions and the interlaced strapwork ornament already mentioned as typical of later 'Red Sea' styles. In addition the Siu minbar has circular patterns carved on the steps and side panels. Strapwork or guilloche decoration is also found on two siwas, which are now displayed in Lamu Museum. A siwa, or long side blown horn, was part of the regalia of the rulers of East Africa and the two surviving in Lamu are by far the most elaborate known, and it has been tentatively suggested that they date to the 17th century. One is carved in ivory with a wide variety of interlaced patterns and inscriptions that have so far defied all efforts at interpretation. The other is made of brass by the process known as the lost wax method and is decorated with more regular knot patterns and an inscription in Mamluk naskhi script that includes verses from a poem by Muhammad b. Bashir al-Himyari. There is no evidence of this type of brasswork ever being carried out in East Africa and the siwa must have been brought from elsewhere. The type of script used in the inscription suggests an Egyptian origin. (27)

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The most commonly found stone carved decorative remains are bosses which generally have simple star or floral motifs and again the interlaced knot pattern. A kind of fleur-de-lys or Saracenic trefoil is also seen as well as mouldings with single or double cable ornament. (28) [plate 1] Decorative work occurs generally round the mihrab of a mosque or on important entrances, and tombs sometimes have inscription plaques but, in the main, the ruins excavated show disappointingly few signs of carved ornament and are austere structures. The most popular ornament to survive are ceramic plates, generally blue and white ware either from Persia or China, and in the later period, 17th and 18th centuries, these were embedded into mihrabs, round entrances and on tombs, presumably in an attempt to emulate the tiled work fashionable in the Ottoman period and as a simple alternative to carved bosses.

There are no early remains of the stucco work that is such a feature later on in Lamu houses, but there is plenty of evidence that walls were plastered with lime and roughly drawn sketches, mainly of ships, have been found on the walls of many sites. Rows of niches become more popular in the later period and the early excavated sites tend to have fewer. Recesses for wooden door frames are seen in entrances and many post holes for timber rafters remain as well as masonry bases for wooden pillars. . Kilwa and Gedi are the two most elaborate archaeological sites of the early 1100-1500 period that have been extensively documented. (29)

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PLATE 1



EXAMPLES OF CARVED CORAL DECORATION:  
ORNAMENTAL BOSSES AND DOUBLE CABLE MOULDING

Besides the archaeological remains there are various descriptions of the main towns written by early Portuguese visitors. The houses are generally described as standing close together in narrow streets and the grander multi-storey buildings, made of plastered masonry with flat roofs, were surrounded by smaller structures of wood and thatch. Stone benches were built outside nearly every house and balconies jutted out over the already narrow streets, providing shade and cover. Doors are mentioned as a special feature for the first time by Duarte Barbosa in 1517. (30) He was a Portuguese trader, who on his return wrote descriptions of the main trading centres he had visited in the Indian Ocean area. He describes the doors at Kilwa as being well carved with excellent joinery, while at Mombasa he remarks that the woodwork was well fitted with excellent joinery. The next time doors are mentioned is in a Portuguese account of the sack of Faza, 1587, when the inhabitants of the neighbouring town of Pate are observed carrying off the doors as part of the booty. (31) In 1661 house doors and chests were used by Omani and Baluchi soldiers to build a redoubt in Mombasa town from which to fire on the Portuguese. (32) There is evidence, therefore, in 16th and 17th century East African coastal towns, that doors were a noteworthy architectural feature and also valued as possessions, but no description survives of their appearance.

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*PROSPERITY ON THE EAST AFRICAN COAST, 1100-1500*

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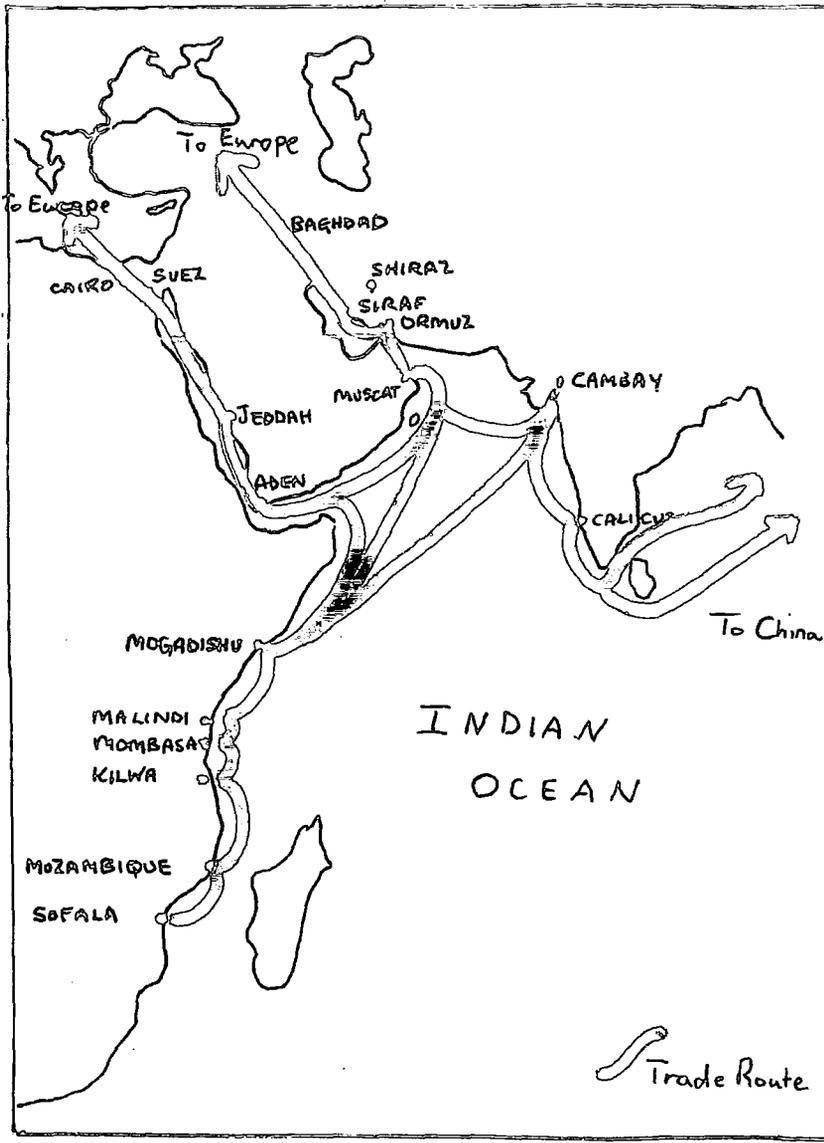
(Note: The main authors consulted for these following historical background sections are Axelson, BBC Publications, Cotton, Coupland, Gray, Kirkman, Oliver and Mathew, Strandes, Toussaint and Villiers. Full titles can be found in the bibliography.)

From the 9th to the end of the 15th century many of the exotic luxury goods that came from the East Indies and China had to pass through the Indian Ocean through the hands of Muslim traders. At the end of this period Europe finally emerged from the 'Dark Ages', threw out the Islamic invaders from the Iberian peninsula and entered a new phase of confidence and expansion. With increased wealth and better living standards, demand for Far Eastern luxuries increased. Spices from the Malayan islands were sought after and fine textiles and perfumes became fashionable in the courts of Europe. The dhow trade in the Indian Ocean reached a peak of activity in the 15th century, partially due to increase in demand and partially due to the closure and disruption of overland routes which had formerly taken a share of the trade. China closed its northern borders to foreigners with the accession of the Ming dynasty in 1368 and porcelain and silks came increasingly by ship from Canton. Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 and ceased to be a major outlet for the west.

Due to these fortuitous circumstances Arab and Indian merchants found themselves with a virtual monopoly in an increasingly lucrative trade. The East African settlements, as staging posts on this route, benefited from the increased volume of goods and number of ships that passed through the Indian Ocean on the way to the Arabian ports and the Red Sea.

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FIG. II



THE CHIEF TRADE ROUTES TO EUROPE AND CHINA  
SHOWING THE PATH AND THE PORTS INVOLVED

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*THE ARRIVAL OF THE PORTUGUESE IN EAST AFRICA*

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Religious as well as economic reasons spurred Europe to find new trade routes of their own to the East. The Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama's voyage round the Cape of Good Hope, up the coast of East Africa and across to Calicut in India in 1498, besides being a major achievement, signalled the end of Arab domination in world trade. It meant that goods destined for the west no longer needed to go on a dhow or to pass through a chain of Arab merchants and middlemen, but could be carried directly from source. Very soon Portuguese routes extended to the East Indies and China itself. Portuguese entry into the Indian Ocean was a disaster for the Arab trading empire in general and not only for the East African settlements. Unlike the dhows which were small ships pointed at both ends and sewn and stuck together with coconut rope and pitch and fitted with sails made from coconut matting, the caravels of the Portuguese were much more sophisticated craft, carrying iron guns and large numbers of fighting men. They did not slip leisurely along the coastline, as the dhows did, trading at the small settlements as they passed, spending a season in a pleasant spot for repairs and dalliance with a local merchant's daughter setting up both a marriage and a business partnership. The much larger, swifter Portuguese vessels called only at the major ports, collected the goods by military force and set up trading stations with forts and garrisons to guard them. If a town refused entry to their ships or refused to trade on Portuguese terms, it was plundered and burnt and intransigent sultans were forced to pay heavy

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finer. Portuguese officials used their positions to enrich themselves as fast as possible so that they could return to Portugal before death and disease caught up with them.

The first Portuguese trading bases were at Kilwa and Malindi, but later the coast was divided into two sectors administered by 'captains'. There was one 'captain' stationed at Mozambique and one at Mombasa. The Portuguese fortress at Mombasa, Fort Jesus, was built from 1593 to house the captain and his garrison of roughly a hundred men. Portuguese freebooting and punitive customs levies on all goods and ships that passed through the ports they controlled, discouraged the traders and even more disastrous for the Swahili trading towns was their monopoly of the gold from Sofala, which was collected at Mozambique and taken to Goa. Sofala, as the gold region south of the Zambesi was called, was always of major interest to the Portuguese, and Goa on the coast of India became the main Portuguese administrative and collection centre for the whole of the Indian Ocean. Both Goa and Mozambique remained in Portuguese hands well into the 20th century.

The Swahili coast, thus deprived of its lucrative gold trade, declined rapidly and by the late 17th century only one ship from Goa visited Mombasa two or three times a year to bring provisions and reinforcements and collect trade goods. Administrative costs far outweighed the profits received from trade. Trading settlements were abandoned and overrun by hostile tribes. Many times Mombasa could have fallen to Turkish or Omani invaders, but in the absence of any

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determinedly aggressive or interested party, the Portuguese remained on as nominal rulers. Only in 1698, when the garrison at Fort Jesus was decimated by disease, did an Omani force finally seize the opportunity and take the last remaining Portuguese stronghold north of the Rovuma.

#### CHANGES IN TRADE PATTERNS DURING THE 17th AND 18th CENTURIES

The East African coastal ports did not recover after the departure of the Portuguese, because in the meantime there had been a major shift in trade patterns and routes. Control of trade passed from Arab dhows, first to the Portuguese and then to the Dutch and British, who plied the waterways to the East in the Indiamen, ships that have been described as a cross between a castle and a floating warehouse. The European route to India and China bypassed the Swahili coast, going round the Cape, crossing the Indian Ocean at the Comoro islands, just north of Madagascar. It was India that benefited most and it was the British port of Bombay on the west coast that became increasingly important as a focal point for international trade in the area. The dhow trade continued as Arabia still needed timber, grain and slaves from East Africa and cotton goods from Cambay were still exchanged for ivory, but activity concentrated in the northern sphere and the southern Swahili ports suffered the worst of the downturn in trade. In the 18th century the Lamu islands emerged as convenient ports of call from south Arabia and their quiet out of the way position far from power struggles elsewhere made them a safe haven for settlement for refugees from all parts of the Islamic world, as well as displaced Swahili settlers from other parts of East Africa. The Lamu

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archipelago with the townships of Pate, Siu, Faza and Lamu, enjoyed peace and prosperity as the Islamic peoples of East Africa regrouped, retrenched and awaited events.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF LAMU

Lamu is the only town on the East African coast to have avoided the disasters that befell all the other towns and remained relatively unchanged. Although the present buildings do not date back further than the 18th century and represent many stages of rebuilding, the style is traditional and the same basic configuration can be found in the stone houses excavated on Swahili sites belonging to the 13th century. Lamu, therefore, should provide a clue as to what the coastal settlements of the early period looked like and give us some idea of the decorative styles. Lamu Town in its present position dates back certainly to the 15th century; it was first recorded in 1441 by Arab sources and is mentioned in Portuguese sources, but was not a place of any importance at that time. (33)

#### 18th CENTURY LAMU HOUSES AND THEIR DECORATION

Lamu houses are typical of Islamic building styles in that the rooms are all inwardly orientated towards an open courtyard, which provides the main source of light and air. The rooms, which are long and narrow, the width dictated by the length of the boriti poles used as rafters, open one into another. The most common form of decoration is stucco work and the interiors of these houses are decorated with a plasterwork patterning of bands and rows of niches round the main doorways and across the walls of the most important rooms. An

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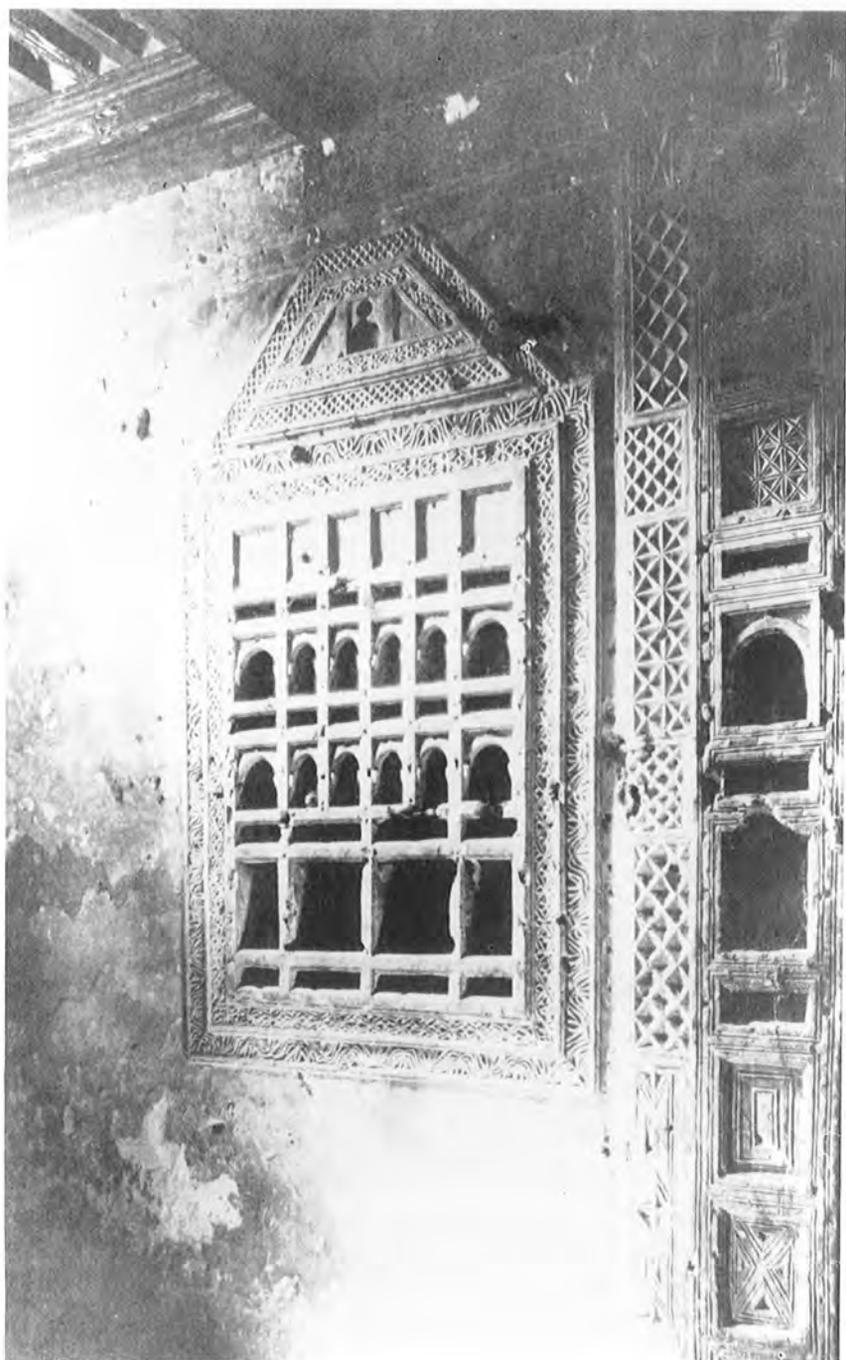
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unusual feature of these houses is the deep entrance porch called a daka, where the small front door is set well inside and flanked by stone benches known as baraza. The porch is roofed with squared rafters, banaa, generally painted in red, white and black, while the area round the door is sometimes decorated with a frame of patterned plasterwork. [plate 5]

The streets in Lamu are very dark and narrow and photographing the doors inside these semi-private secluded entrance porches is not easy. However plate 3 shows a Lamu door, where the only decoration is a carved central door post. This post is carved with rosettes or some kind of circular design, a fleur-de-lys shape, while the top and bottom extremities have a geometric or a kind of fish scale pattern - ingredients which constantly turn up in the centreposts of the 19th century doors and in the designs found on local handicrafts. It is difficult to say how many of the simple Lamu doorposts are actually 18th century, as most have been replaced more recently and are not made from the best or most durable wood. However the type of entrance precludes the large elaborate door that became fashionable in the 19th century and these doors must represent a rather different, if not earlier tradition.

The Lamu style of house is found in Mogadishu but not in Zanzibar or Mombasa. This is not surprising as the stone town in Mombasa is based on a Portuguese settlement, which was appropriated by Omani Arabs, while the stone town of Zanzibar was built in the 19th century by

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EXAMPLE OF LAMU PLASTERWORK DECORATION INSIDE A HOUSE  
(Richard Hughes)



LAMU DOOR SET WITHIN A DAKA



CENTREPOST IN MOMBASA SHOWING TYPICAL MOTIFS



LAMU DOOR WITH DECORATED PLASTERWORK FRAME

Indian merchants for an Omani sultan. The stucco work found in the Lamu houses also dies out and is not seen in Lamu after 1830 (34), possibly because it was considered old fashioned or possibly because the Omani rulers did not like it. Despite this many of the patterns used in Lamu plasterwork occur in door carving and familiar designs are often just transferred to a different medium. A form of nichework is seen on an old door in the Fort at Mombasa, (35) [plate 6] while a door in Lamu shows a flat fluid quality of carving reminiscent of plasterwork and is perhaps the work of a craftsman working in an unaccustomed material. [plate 7]

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DOOR IN FORT JESUS, MOMBASA:  
CARVED WITH NICHES



LAMU DOOR SHOWING INFLUENCE FROM PLASTERWORK TECHNIQUE

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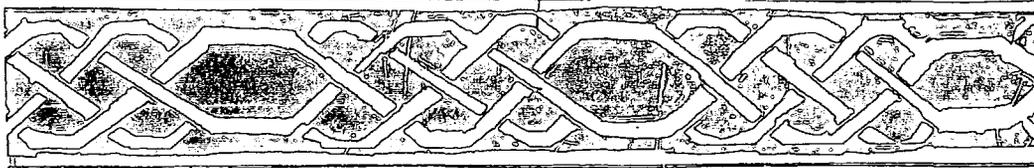
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER II

1. Abdulaziz (1979), 11-12, Nicholls (1971), 74-5
  2. Jewell (1969), 2
  3. Freeman-Grenville (1962), 3-21: excerpts from Claudius Ptolemy, Al-Mas'udi, Tuan Ch'eng-shih and also Al-Idrisi dating c.400-1100.
  4. Lewcock (1976) passim
  5. There are numerous references which show that the coast of East Africa was much more thickly forested than it appears today and which mention the many different kinds of vegetables, crops and fruits that were grown. Freeman-Grenville (1962), 155. The report by Gaspar di San Bernardino who journeyed along the coast in 1606 and saw islands, thickly wooded and full of fruit trees and groves of sugar cane, millet and rice. Mombasa in those days was surrounded by thick woods and water teeming with fish. *ibid* 144, the description of the Dutchman Van Linschoten c.1596 of the great trees of Kilwa: *ibid* 139, Father Monclaro's visit to Zanzibar in 1569 when he saw 'the most beautiful timber I have ever seen' and walked two leagues through dense forest.
  6. Freeman-Grenville (1962), 27 and 31, Ibn Battuta's report.
  7. Strandes (1899), 25-6, the Portuguese found everything they needed for revictualling their ships at Malindi in 1498. The only basic commodity in short supply was wheat flour which was imported from Cambay in small quantities only.
  8. Ibn Battuta, an Arab Geographer, who visited East Africa in 1331, was the first to use the term Swahili, which is from the Arabic sahel meaning coast. Strandes (1899), 142 and Kirkman footnote, *ibid*, 313.
  9. Incorporated by Joao de Barros in his work Decadas da Asia, published in 1552. The Arabic version of this chronicle is dated 1867 and is more difficult to follow. English translations of both can be read in Freeman-Grenville (1962), 34-49 and 220-7.
  10. The Mombasa Chronicle was first recorded by Owen, (1833), 414-22, but can more easily be read in Freeman-Grenville (1962), 213-19.
  11. The Pate Chronicle was first written down by Stigand (1913), but a more up to date version can be read in Freeman-Grenville (1962), 241-96.
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12. There is considerable controversy as to whether the Shirazis originated from Persia or from Shungwaya in East Africa, or indeed ever existed as a group of actual people. Nevertheless in the opinion of the writer, the following is the most likely explanation and it is based on the earliest documented source available: Freeman-Grenville (1962), 90-93, translation of the history of the kings of Kilwa included in a description of the expedition of Francisco d'Almeida, 1505-6, from the original written by the Portuguese historian Joao de Barros in 1552.
  13. Chittick (1974), 14, dated these c.1200, but Horton (1986), suggests an earlier dating.
  14. Kirkman (1964), 45; Dedicatory inscription in the qibla of the Mosque of Arba Rukn.
  15. The inscription reads 'This is what has ordered the high and very great Shaikh es-Saiyid Abu Imran Musa, son of el Hasan son of Muhammad.....may Allah grant him long life and destroy his enemies...about building this mosque on a Sunday of the month Dhu-lqa'da in the year 500' (A.D.1107). Flury (1922). Flury also suggests the Shirazi connection, *ibid*, 263. Also see Freeman-Grenville (1982): 'Some thoughts on Buzurg ibn Shahriyar al-Ramhormuzi: The book of the wonders of India' Paideuma, 28, Wiesbaden, 68. I am grateful to Mr J. de V. Allen for pointing out this reference to me.
  16. Strandes (1899), 73-9.
  17. Chittick (1974), 15.
  18. A full translation of the travels of Ibn Battuta were translated into English by Gibb (1929), but his description of Kilwa can be seen in Freeman-Grenville (1962), 31.
  19. Strandes (1899), 295; Kirkman footnote to the 1971 edition.
  20. 'In Kilwa there are storied houses very stoutly built of masonry and covered with a plaster that has a thousand paintings', written aboard the San Rafael, one of the ships in Francisco D'Almeida's fleet, July 1505, and quoted by Chittick (1974), 249. This same passage is translated by Freeman-Grenville (1962), 106, taken to mean plasterwork decoration. Strandes (1899), 80, comments that houses were reported to be painted inside and out.
  21. Ricks (1970), 346
  22. For illustrations of these two doors, see Talbot-Rice (1975), pls 87 and 176
  23. Talbot-Rice (1975), 139
  24. Unwin (1987)
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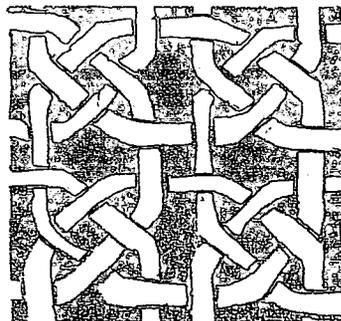
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25. Horton (1984)b, 5 and Horton (1986)a, 209
26. Freeman-Grenville (1973), 108 and pl I, also Allen (1974)b, 25. Both minbars appear to have been assembled from various pieces and the panel with the inscription may be the only part that is 16th century.

Carved Wooden Border Decoration of the Siu Minbar Inscription Panel dated 1523/4



27. The information about Lamu siwas is taken from Sassoon (1975) *passim*

The Guilloche Pattern from the Cylinder of the Ivory Siwa, Lamu



28. For illustrations see Chittick (1974), pls 159-64
29. See Kirkman (1954): and Chittick (1974)
30. Freeman-Grenville (1962), 131
31. Strandes (1899), 131
32. Axelson (1960), 140
33. Lamu is first mentioned by the Arab writer, Abu Al-Mahasin, who met a qadi from Lamu, visiting Mecca in 1441, Freeman-Grenville (1962), 33
34. Allen (1973)a, 6, nichework and plaster decoration is also seen in old buildings of the Yemen and Hadramawt and may have originated from there rather than India, *ibid* (1973)b, 87
35. This door, which was altered by Hardinge for his office in Fort Jesus in 1895, is unusual in East Africa. It can be compared to the doors in Mirbat, south Oman. One illustrated, Costa (1985), pl 216, has the same motif of a palm tree decorating a niche.
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CHAPTER III

THE OMANI PERIOD IN  
EAST AFRICA AND ITS DOORS

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OMANI SETTLEMENT IN THE 18th AND 19th CENTURIES

At the end of the 18th century signs appear of a change of fashion both in house and in decoration connected with a new wave of settlement coming from Oman and India.

By the end of the 17th century Omani Arabs had ousted the Portuguese from all ports north of Mozambique and were to be the foreign dominating power for the next two centuries. Initially their control was largely indirect and there was little settlement. Mombasa which fell in 1698 and had previously been an administrative centre for the Portuguese was one of the few places to have an Omani governor set over the local people. (1)

Although available sources are somewhat unclear, it seems that Nasur b. Abdullah al-Mazrui, came with the force that took Fort Jesus from the Portuguese in 1698 and thus became Mombasa's first Omani governor. (2) He married a sister of one of the Swahili notables in Mombasa, Sheikh b. Ahmad al-Malindi and from that point the Mazrui family history becomes linked with that of Mombasa. Local discontent forced them out briefly in 1728, when the Portuguese were invited to retrieve the Fort. (3) Omani influence was quickly reinstated the next year but the Mazruis temporarily lost their hold on the governorship. However the two succeeding non-Mazrui governors proved themselves so inept that c.1731 Nasur's nephew, Muhammad b. Uthman was appointed to try and improve the deteriorating situation in Mombasa. (4) It happened that during his tenure there was a coup d'état in Oman and the Yorubi ruling dynasty was replaced by that of the Busaidi.

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Taking advantage of the civil war and confusion in Oman, Muhammad declared himself independent in Mombasa c.1741. He refused to acknowledge the new ruler or pay the kharaj, land tax and proportion of customs revenue, that he had formerly paid to the Yorubi sultan. (5) One of the main reasons behind this action was the fact that the Mazruis belonged to a tribal grouping called the Ghafiri, while the Busaidis came from an opposing group called Hinawi. There was traditional animosity and rivalry between the two factions. Both the Nabhanis of Pate and the Mazruis belonged to this Ghafiri division and both were extremely reluctant to submit to Busaidi authority.

In 1744 the Busaidi Imam, Ahmad b. Said sent a delegation from Oman to assassinate the Mazrui governor in Mombasa and replace him. This was successfully accomplished and various Mazrui personnel were executed. However Muhammad's brother, Ali b. Uthman, escaped, and enlisting local support and help from a visiting British merchantman, was able to expel the unwanted Busaidi governor and garrison and appoint himself governor instead. (6)

From 1745-1837 the Mazruis held Mombasa, which was ruled as an independent city state and was not tributary to the Busaidi rulers in Oman. The Busaidis had to remain content with maintaining their presence in Zanzibar, which had been under Omani protection since c.1660 but was a minor trading centre compared with Mombasa. It is probable, though it is not recorded, that the Busaidis kept an agent in Lamu as well.

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Troubles in Oman gave the Busaidi rulers no opportunity to supervise their overseas dominions, which were at this time viewed as little more than convenient collection points for trade.

There were a number of reasons which caused more direct intervention and settlement from Oman. By the end of the 18th century, Mazrui influence on the Swahili coast had become greater than that of the Busaidi, it stretched from the Pangani river, north of Zanzibar all the way to Malindi and through their alliance with the Nabhanis of Pate was beginning to encroach as far as the Lamu archipelago. The Mazrui history claims that this alliance dated back to the time of Governor Masud (1754-1777) and that a Mazrui garrison was kept in Pate. (7) The history of the East African coast at this juncture becomes yet more confused and obscure. However reading between the lines, it seems that Lamu was growing increasingly prosperous through its export of cowries and hides, mainly to India, (8) while Pate, previously the more important town, was declining. This state of affairs was not improved by the continuous squabbles among the Nabhanis over the line of succession in Pate. The rival claimants tended to enlist outside support, one turning to Lamu and one to Mombasa and there were endless intrigues as each side tried to out-manoeuve the other. The Mazruis saw this as an opportunity to extend their area of influence and were gaining the upper hand. In 1809 they successfully placed their candidate, Ahmad, as ruler in Pate, captured Fumoloti, the rival claimant who was living in Lamu, imprisoned him in Mombasa and put strong garrisons in Pate and Lamu. (9) These actions seriously alarmed the people of Lamu, who had no wish to share their

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trading profits with a Mazrui governor, or see their town made feudatory to Mombasa. They refused to pay the Mazrui governor's son the customs dues he came to collect. Faced with disaster the disparate factions of Lamu united. It is probable that they sent for help to Oman and Zanzibar and when the combined forces of Mombasa and Pate attacked and tried to land at the beach at Shela in 1812 they were defeated. There seems to have been an unofficial Busaidi representative, Ahmad b. Maftah al-Hinawi, already residing in Lamu (10), but after this crucial Mazrui reversal, the position became official and a member of the ruling family was sent to take up the governorship of Lamu in 1814. When there was another dispute over the succession in Pate in 1822, the Mazruis again tried to interfere, but were unsuccessful and after this incident Pate, as well as Lamu, was placed under direct Busaidi supervision. To commemorate his achievements the Lamu governor, Muhammad b. Naser al-Mawali al-Busaidi, caused an inscription to be carved over the fort door in Lamu, which was now in his undisputed possession. (11)

The confrontation in the Lamu archipelago, which started as a local squabble, escalated into a major power struggle between the Mazruis and Busaidis, at the end of which, the Busaidis emerged as overall winners for the controlling interest in the East African coast. The capture of Pemba further diminished Mazrui holdings and Mombasa and her would-be ally, Pate, declined. Zanzibar and Lamu prospered and took over much of the business and trade that had formerly been conducted at Mombasa and Pate.

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To the south, Kilwa, encouraged by the example of Mombasa, had thrown off the shackles of Oman in 1771(12) and declared themselves independent and were able to profit from trading in slaves directly with the French, without paying part of their revenue to an overlord. This was stopped in 1785, (13) when Kilwa was forced once more to accept an Omani governor appointed by the Busaidis. French slavers were allowed to trade only through Zanzibar or through its agent at Kilwa. By 1811 it was reported that Kilwa was reduced to the state of a petty village. (14)

The 1770s saw an upturn in trading activity on the Swahili coast. This was particularly due to the French, who needed slaves for their colonies in the Ile de France and Bourbon (the Mascarene islands), and more generally due to the overall increase in commercial activity and prosperity of the British trading centres in India. There was also an expansion of Omani commerce, which increased after the outbreak of the Napoleonic wars, during which time the Omanis, flying under a neutral flag, were able to capture a large proportion of the carrying trade in the Indian Ocean. Their ships, crewed by slaves from East Africa, could operate more cheaply and undercut competitors.

It was the French activities in Kilwa which first alerted Busaidi attention and made the Omani merchants feel the need to tighten control in order to prevent outsiders from establishing themselves in the region. Further attention was focussed on East Africa when in 1784, Ahmad b. Said's fourth son, Seif, who disputed the succession of his elder brother, Said, went to East Africa to try and seize his

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brother's possessions there and raise a rebellion. (15) He approached the French and tried to capture Kilwa and Zanzibar. His visit was followed swiftly in 1785 by an Omani force sent by his elder brother, commanded by an uncle and a son of the reigning Said, who visited all the Omani settlements along the coast to ensure their loyalty. (16) Seif's ambitions came to nothing when he died at Lamu, but the incident drew Omani attention to the potential of the East African coast for trade and settlement. By 1802 the revenue from the Swahili coast amounted to one quarter of the total income of the sultan of Oman and this increased to more than one third in 1811. (17) The East African coast was increasingly viewed as a valuable asset and important source of income.

Enriched by the slave trade, Omani merchants were investing in land in Zanzibar and Lamu and settling in increasing numbers. It must be remembered that East Africa offered many advantages over Oman and must have been a far easier and pleasanter place in which to live. By 1822/3 the only major centre on the Swahili coast which was not tributary to the ruler of Oman, was Mombasa. Mombasa, bowing to the inevitable, finally capitulated in 1837 and the Mazruis were expelled. The Nabhanis based in Siu conducted a rearguard action for several more years but their prolonged resistance brought them little reward, as Siu followed Pate in precipitous decline. Mombasa recovered slowly and by 1870 had retrieved its position as a major commercial centre.

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It was during the reign of Seyyid Said, who ruled Oman 1805-1856 that the full potential of coastal East Africa was recognised. This remarkable man made himself undisputed ruler over the whole coast of East Africa and drastically modernised and reorganised his possessions into an efficient trading empire. He was above all a merchant prince and was renowned as an astute businessman and politician. He first visited Zanzibar in person in 1828, when he brought over furniture and craftsmen to build him a palace at Mtoni. In succeeding years he paid several visits, but was not able to reside there until after 1840, though he considered it his capital from 1832. By this time revenues from East Africa exceeded those from Oman, and his African territories had become the most prosperous part of his empire. (18)

It was he who encouraged Indian merchants to bring their businesses to Zanzibar and settle, and he planted clove trees and crops wherever the soil was fertile. He much admired the version of western civilisation he saw in British India and the shipping and trade that went with it. There was a continuing expansion of trade in the Indian Ocean during the 19th century, directly linked with the success of the British Empire in India. Seyyid Said, as a long-standing ally of the British, who had proved more powerful than their rivals, the French, was able to profit from this and enjoy a share of the prosperity created.

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OMANI HOUSES AND DECORATION

One of the few examples of an Omani house to survive in recognizable form near Mombasa, is the old Mazrui palace at Gazi. [plate 8] Originally it was a far more impressive two storey building than it appears today. Unlike most buildings which increase with time, it has diminished and is nowadays a disappointing single storey structure with corrugated iron roofing. The original ground plan, however, can still be seen. The building is raised on a plinth at the front and the side wings extend round an open courtyard containing a cistern at the rear. There appear once to have been tower blocks on the sea facing corners. Inside there is none of the elaborate plasterwork decoration of the Lamu houses, only occasional plain niches, barred windows and ventilation holes. The unadorned architecture of the house at Gazi is similar to Seyyid Said's stark palaces in mid-19th century Zanzibar. (19) The organization of the narrow reception hall at Gazi lined with stone baraza seats and with a centrally placed main door, bears a close resemblance to the 18th century Mazrui hall in Fort Jesus, the squared ceiling beams of which are ornamented with Quranic passages and must predate 1793, the year an inscription was painted on one of the walls.

At Gazi, ornamentation is kept to a minimum and confined to the doors. The focal point is the main front entrance, where the carving is extended to the lintel and right round a wide door frame. It is a large and impressive door and is not hidden in a deep secluded daka or outer open reception porch. Houses of this sort are still found in the old coastal trading ports of Oman and give a fair idea of what

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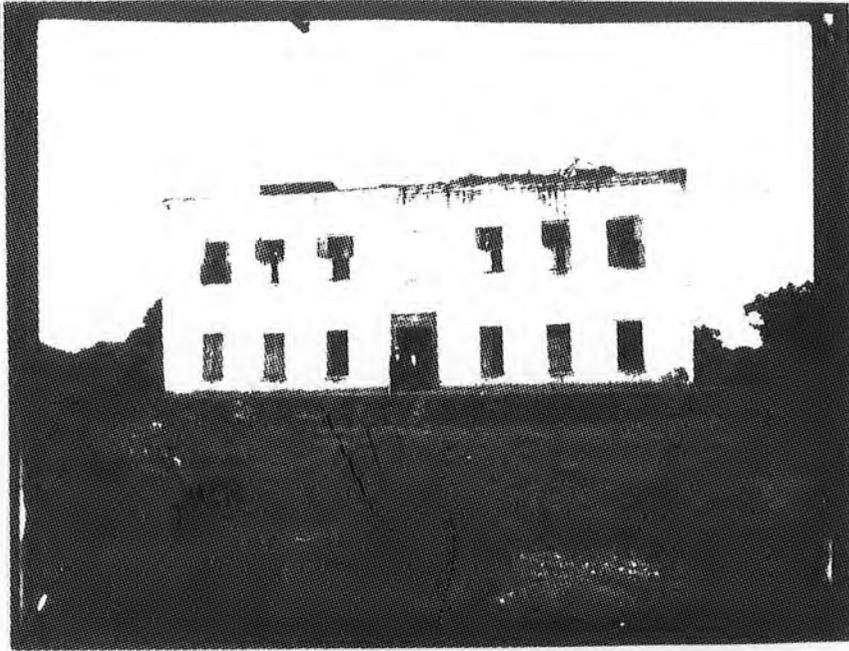


PLATE 8

THE PALACE AT GAZI, 1899  
(National Museums of Kenya)



THE MAZRUI HALL, FORT JESUS, MOMBASA: IN THE FOREGROUND  
CAN BE SEEN THE DECORATED STEMPOST OF A WRECKED BAGHLAH

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19th century Mombasa once looked like. The houses in Mombasa were generally on a smaller scale, not even whitewashed and mostly single storey, though the main merchant houses would have had two storeys, with the warehouse and slave quarters below. There are one or two photographs of Mombasa dating to the 1890s, which give some idea of this. [plate 9]

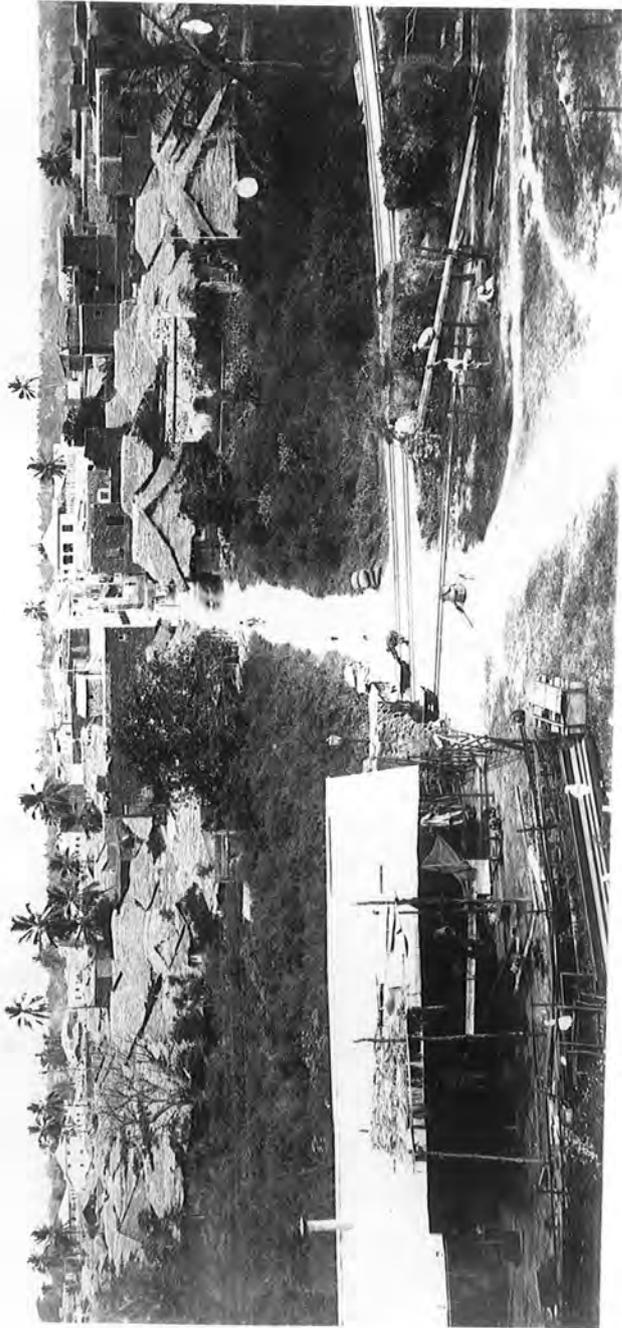
Such has been the Indian rebuilding programme in Mombasa since the late 19th century, it is hard to recognise the older buildings, but in a few, the central courtyard is still preserved, providing a welcome cooling effect. It seems the houses in Mombasa were not provided with inside staircases and many of these older houses have outside staircases like perilous fire escapes, sometimes enclosed with wooden lattice work to allow the women to move between the added floors without being seen from outside. The enclosed wooden balconies are also later additions.

#### THE DATED DOORS

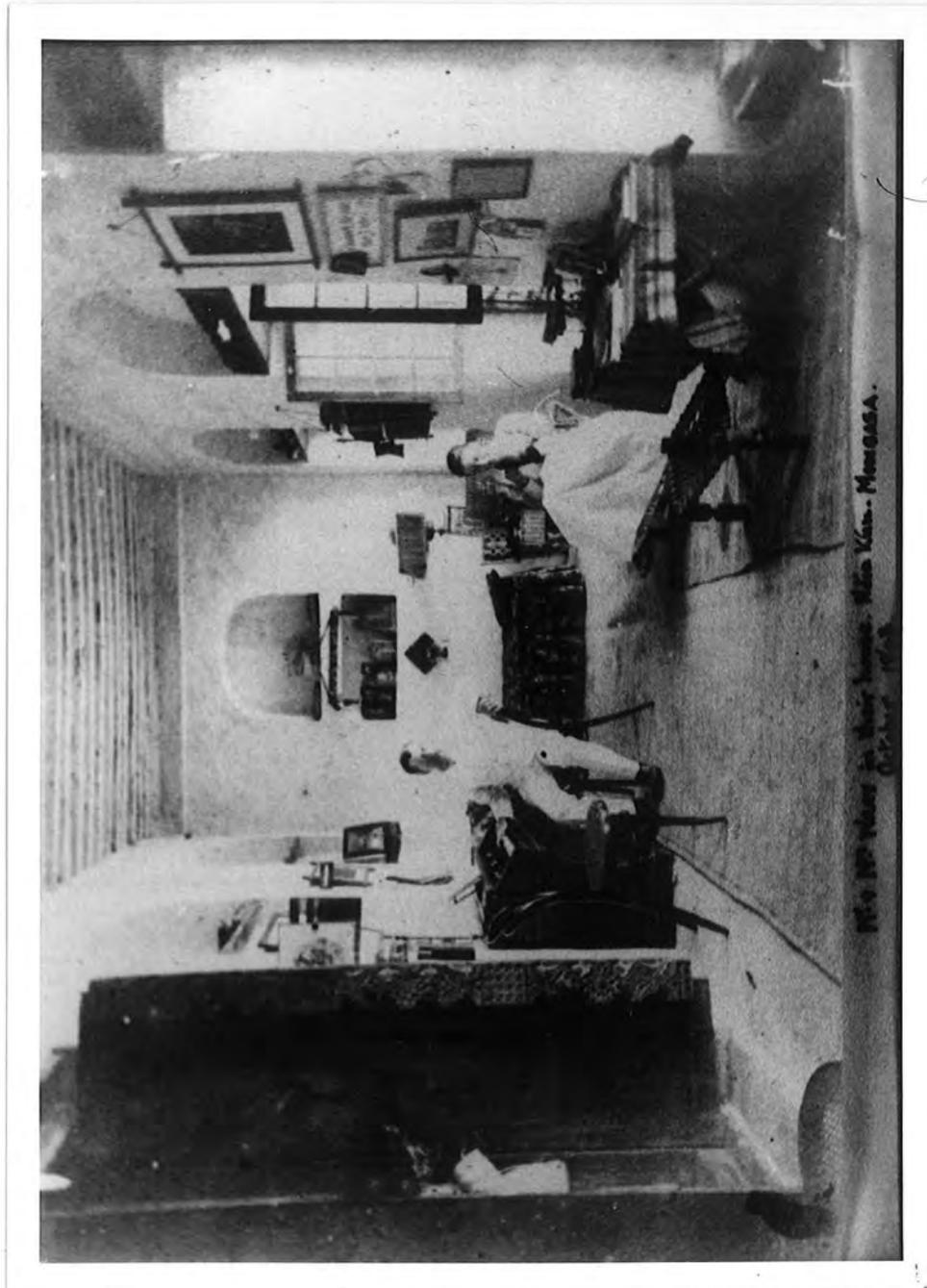
The earliest dated door to my knowledge which remains in situ is found in Lamu and bears a date 1797. (20) [plate 11] It is situated opposite the N'Nlalo Mosque, one of the most prestigious in the town, especially associated with the ruling families of Lamu. Locally known as the Mskiti wa zijoho, 'the Mosque of Those in Stately Robes', it has a foundation date of 1753/4. The first Busaidi of the ruling family in Oman arrived in Lamu in 1784. (21) He was Seif, younger son of Ahmad b. Said, who jealous of his brother, hoped to carve himself out a kingdom in East Africa and, unsuccessful in Zanzibar, had moved

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PLATE 9



VIEW OF MOMBASA c. 1895  
(Mr A. E. N. Adamjee, Mombasa)



INTERIOR OF A HOUSE IN MOMBASA, 1893, SHOWING  
PLAIN NICHEs AND A CARVED DOOR  
(National Museums of Kenya)

PLATE 11



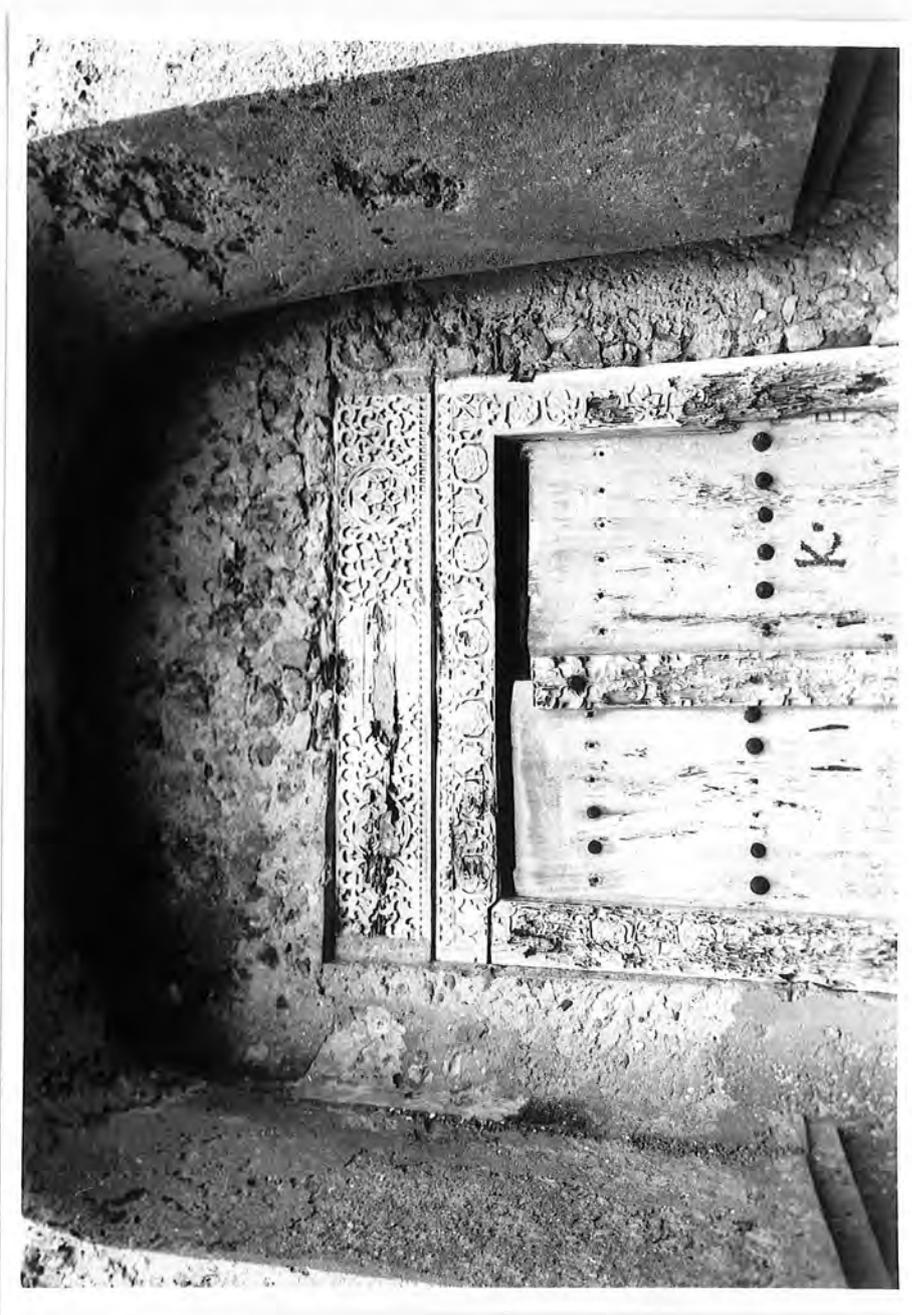
DOOR IN LAMU DATED 1797

by invitation to Lamu, where he died shortly after. It appears that the ruling oligarchy of nobles in Lamu were already forging a closer relationship with Oman to protect themselves from the expansionist policies of the Mazruis in Mombasa and their allies, the Mabhans of Pate.

The second oldest door on this coast line, which can in any way be dated accurately, is the door of the Kilwa fort.[plate 12] This door has an inscription, nowadays unreadable, but which once, according to reliable sources, included the date of 1807.(22) The inscription originally read "In the name of the Almighty and all merciful God we have opened this gateway to thee on 23 Muharram 1222" (2nd April 1807)(23). This fort was rebuilt from the ruins of an earlier dated Portuguese fortification at the order of Yaqut, an Abyssinian eunuch, who was the representative of the sultan of Muscat and who also rebuilt the fort in Zanzibar. The Kilwa door has a very fine, but badly weathered door with the interesting feature of a wicket gate, found in Muscat doors, but not usually a feature of doors on the Swahili coast. This door therefore has clear connections with both Oman and the ruling Busaidi family.

The third door of this type bears a date of 1820(24) and is again found in Lamu. By this time a distinct pattern is emerging, and the fourth, dated 1835/6, (25) the door to the now Mahrus Hotel in Lamu's main shopping street close to the fort, confirms this.[plates 14 & 15] Probably the most distinctive feature is the decorative frame, which is carved with an alternating vine pattern which is interspersed

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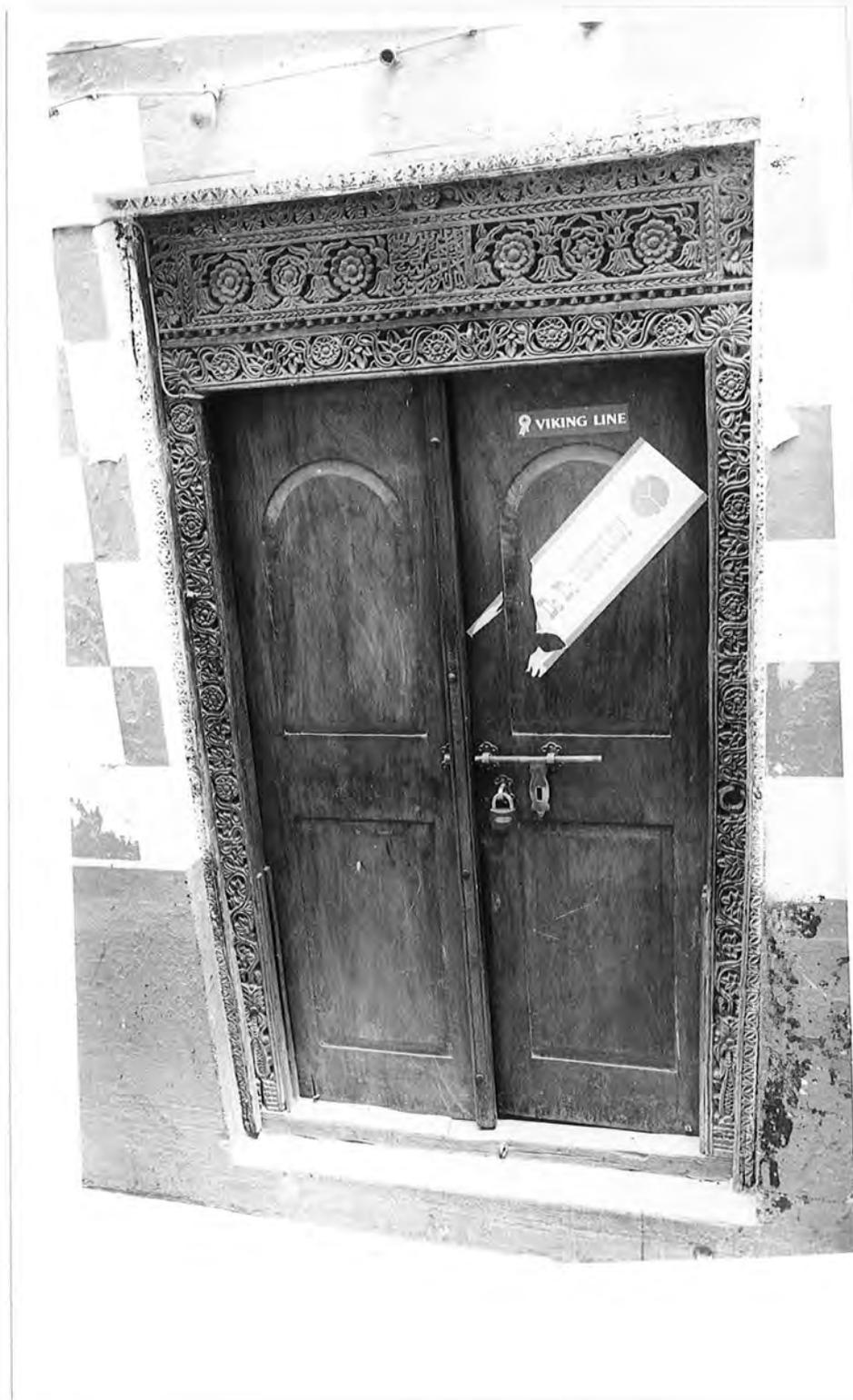
DOOR TO THE FORT AT KILWA, ONCE DATED 1807  
(British Institute in East Africa)



OLD LINTEL NEAR THE PORT AT ZANZIBAR. THE DESIGN RELATES CLOSELY TO THAT FOUND ON THE DOOR TO THE KILWA FORT



LAMU DOOR DATED 1820



LAMU DOOR DATED 1835/6

with rosettes and a lotus flower derivative. At the foot on either side is a strange urn or vase-like object. The looping floral scroll design appears to derive ultimately from the classical anthemion ornament, which is often combined with palmettes, the decorative shapes that occur in the upper corners of these early doors. Above the frame is an elaborate lintel carved in the earliest door with an interlacing pattern, but in the later examples this becomes a row of rosettes interrupted by a central inscription plaque, giving the date of completion and an appropriate passage from the Quran. The centrepost where it still remains, seems to follow the design of the Lamu doors already discussed, with rosettes, fleurs-de-lys or lotus shapes, areas of geometric patterning and terminal fish scaling. The door panels are plain, decorated with rows of large round-headed nails, or in the case of the Kilwa Fort, with iron spikes. It is fairly clear that these doors represent the taste of the Busaidi Sultanate. It is the type of door that Seyyid Said chooses for his new palaces in Zanzibar. There are several doors formerly belonging to the outbuildings and harem of his town residence, Bait al-Sahel, nowadays situated just behind the Bait al-Ajaib in Zanzibar, [plates 16-19] which relate closely to the doors in Lamu.

The later examples of this style show an increasing tendency towards massiveness. The door becomes wider and squarer, the carving less undercut, and in less important doors, the inscription plaque is omitted. This development is clearly seen in the Customs House door in Zanzibar, which is dated 1860 (26) and in the door to the Rodha Mosque in Lamu, dated 1870. (27) [plates 20 & 21]

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DOOR TO A PART OF A FORMER ROYAL PALACE OF SEYYID SAID,  
NOWADAYS USED AS A SCHOOL, ZANZIBAR

PLATE 17

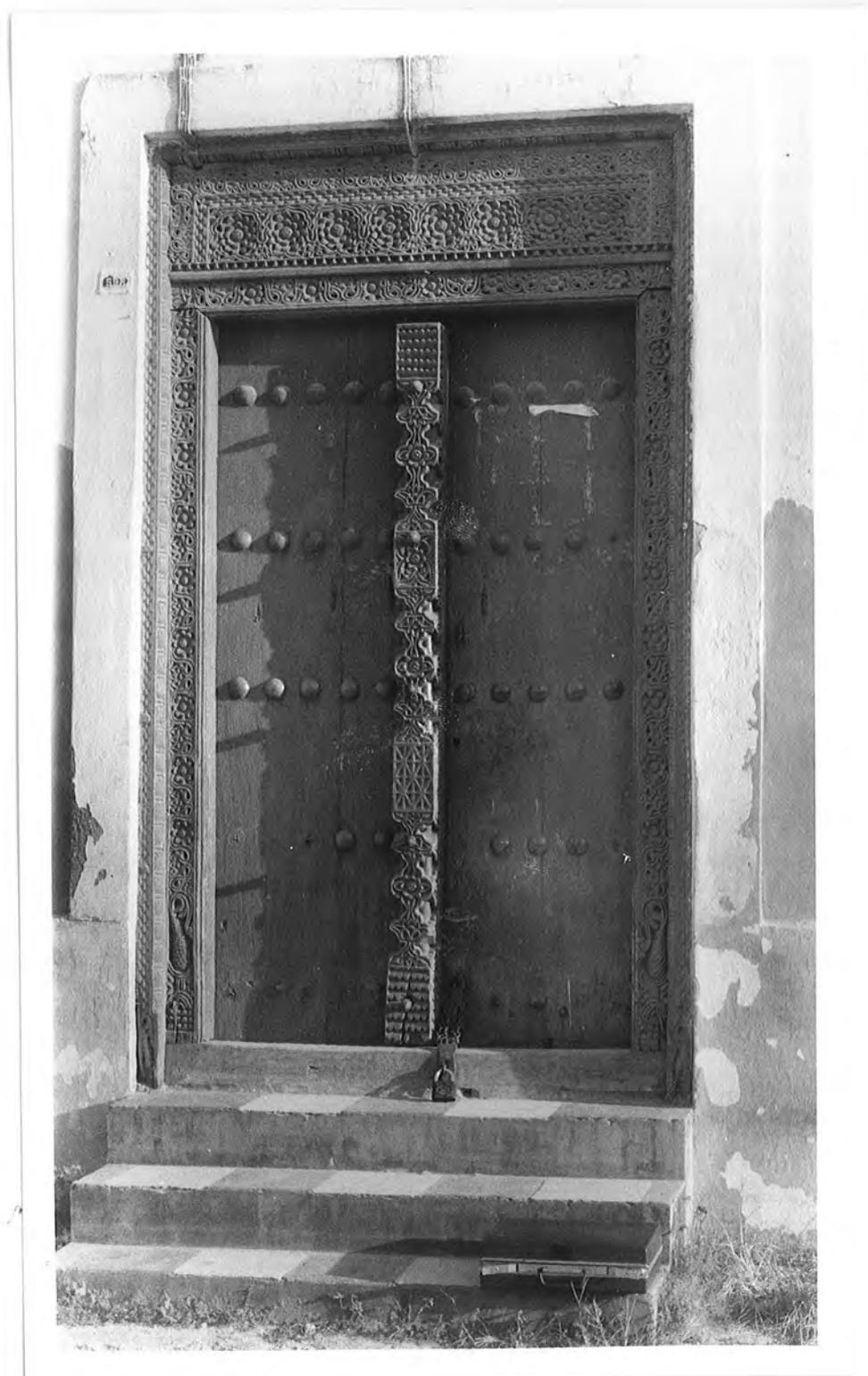


DOOR TO ONE OF THE FORMER PALACES OF  
THE ROYAL FAMILY, ZANZIBAR

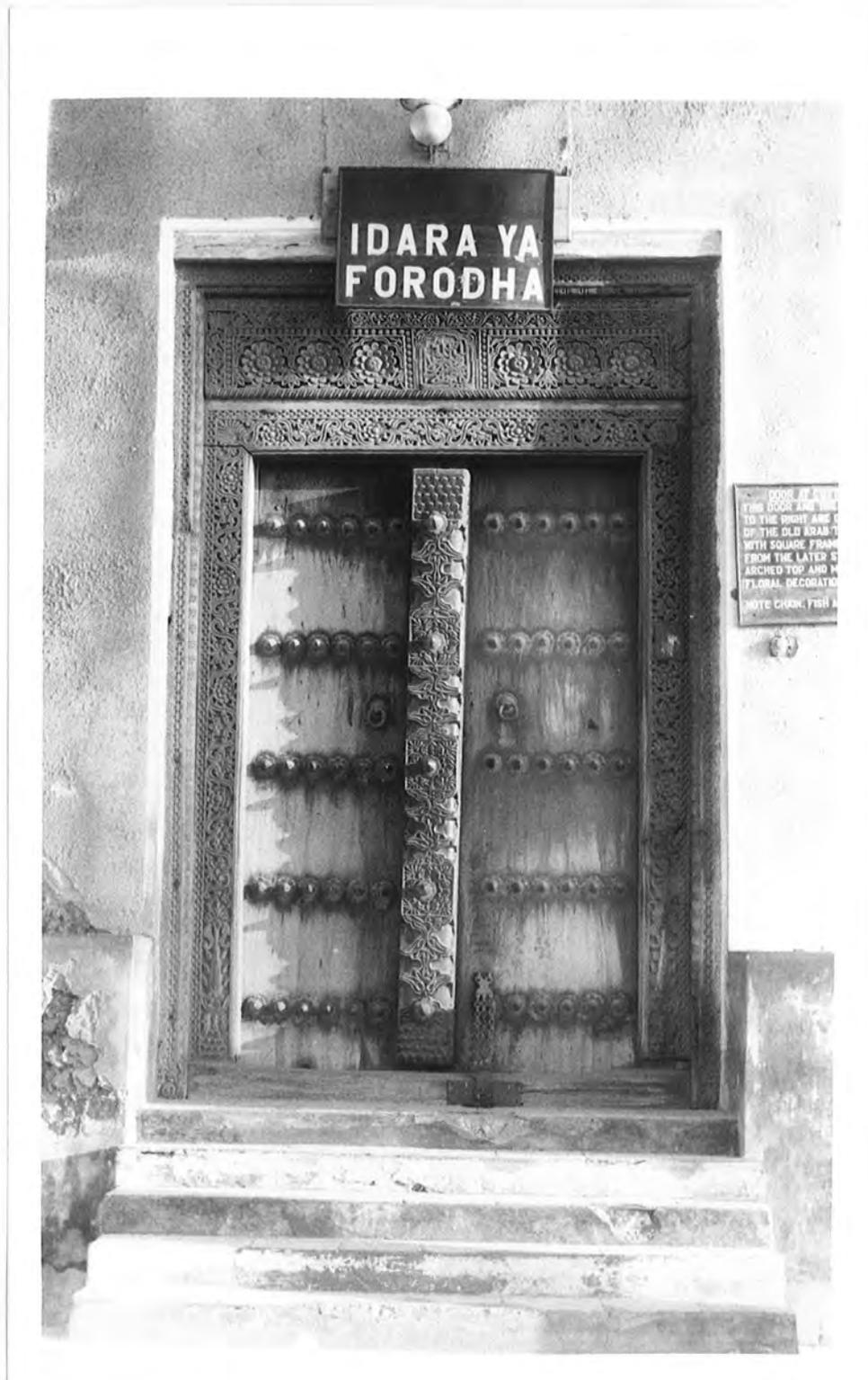
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DOOR TO A FORMER RESIDENCE OF THE ROYAL FAMILY,  
NOW A GOVERNMENT OFFICE, ZANZIBAR



ROSETTE DOOR, ZANZIBAR



CUSTOMS HOUSE DOOR, ZANZIBAR, DATED 1860



DOOR TO THE RODHA MOSQUE, LAMU, DATED 1870

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Perhaps providing a clue to the origin of this style of door is the very fine one that is now the back door to the Peace Museum in Zanzibar, opened in 1925.[plate 22] This door is said to have come from Kidichi, where Persian baths were built for Seyyid Said's second Persian wife, a daughter of Irich Mirza, whom he married in 1849. On the lintel below the Quranic inscription, is a date which reads 1113, (28) corresponding to the year 1701/2 in the Christian calendar. This seems an astonishingly early date and would make this the earliest known door in East Africa, predating other early doors by nearly a hundred years. It is said that masons were imported from Persia to work on the decorations for the baths at Kidichi, (29) and one possibility is that this very fine door, which is in remarkably good condition, was brought from Persia as part of the decorations for Kidichi in order to make Seyyid Said's new wife feel at home. She came to Zanzibar with a large retinue, including a private executioner, and appears to have scandalised the Omani Arabs by her behaviour and extravagance. During Mark Horton's recent examination of the monuments in Zanzibar, a date of 1832 was discovered in the plasterwork at Kidichi, which may mean that these baths were begun for Seyyid Said's first Persian wife, a grand-daughter of the Shah of Persia, Fath'Ali Shah, whom he married in 1827, but who did not care for life in Zanzibar and went back home.

Certainly the format of this door is one that becomes common in East Africa only during the 19th century, although if the date is to be believed, the style was flourishing in other parts of the world long before. This would tend to support the theory that this kind of door

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DOOR DATED 1701/2, NOW THE BACK DOOR  
TO ZANZIBAR MUSEUM



DOOR DATED 1701/2: REAR VIEW OF THE BACK DOOR  
TO ZANZIBAR MUSEUM

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carving was introduced to Zanzibar and Lamu via Oman and was not a new design, but part of a well established tradition that was to be seen in the Persian towns of the Gulf area. The reason the design became popular in East Africa was because the decorative motifs were already familiar and there had always been a history of door carving. East African Omani merchants with their new found wealth and leisure and an environment where artistic decoration was no longer frowned on, imported luxuries and craftsmen to build them the grand residences still to be seen in Zanzibar. They began to turn away from the puritanical ethics of strict Ibadism.

After 1870 this style of door continued to be carved, but was simplified and popularised, reaching the doors of more ordinary citizens. See, for example, the door to a mosque in Lamu, which bears a date 1876.[plate 25] (30) The design, though based on the sultan's doors, has been much simplified and shows a less fine technique in the carving work. There are several doors in Mombasa that relate to this door and belong to a later period, when with increasing prosperity, more people could enjoy the luxury and prestige of a carved door.[plate 26]

There are only two doors in Mombasa which seem to belong to the earlier period of this door type. One is in the Basheikh Mosque, a Friday mosque, and old.[plate 27] The other once belonged to the Shikeli family from Oman.[plate 28] The rosette door in the fort in Mombasa clearly dates much later and the inclusion of rounded jambs puts it post 1890.[plate 29]

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OLD DOOR FROM MUSCAT, BAIT NADIR

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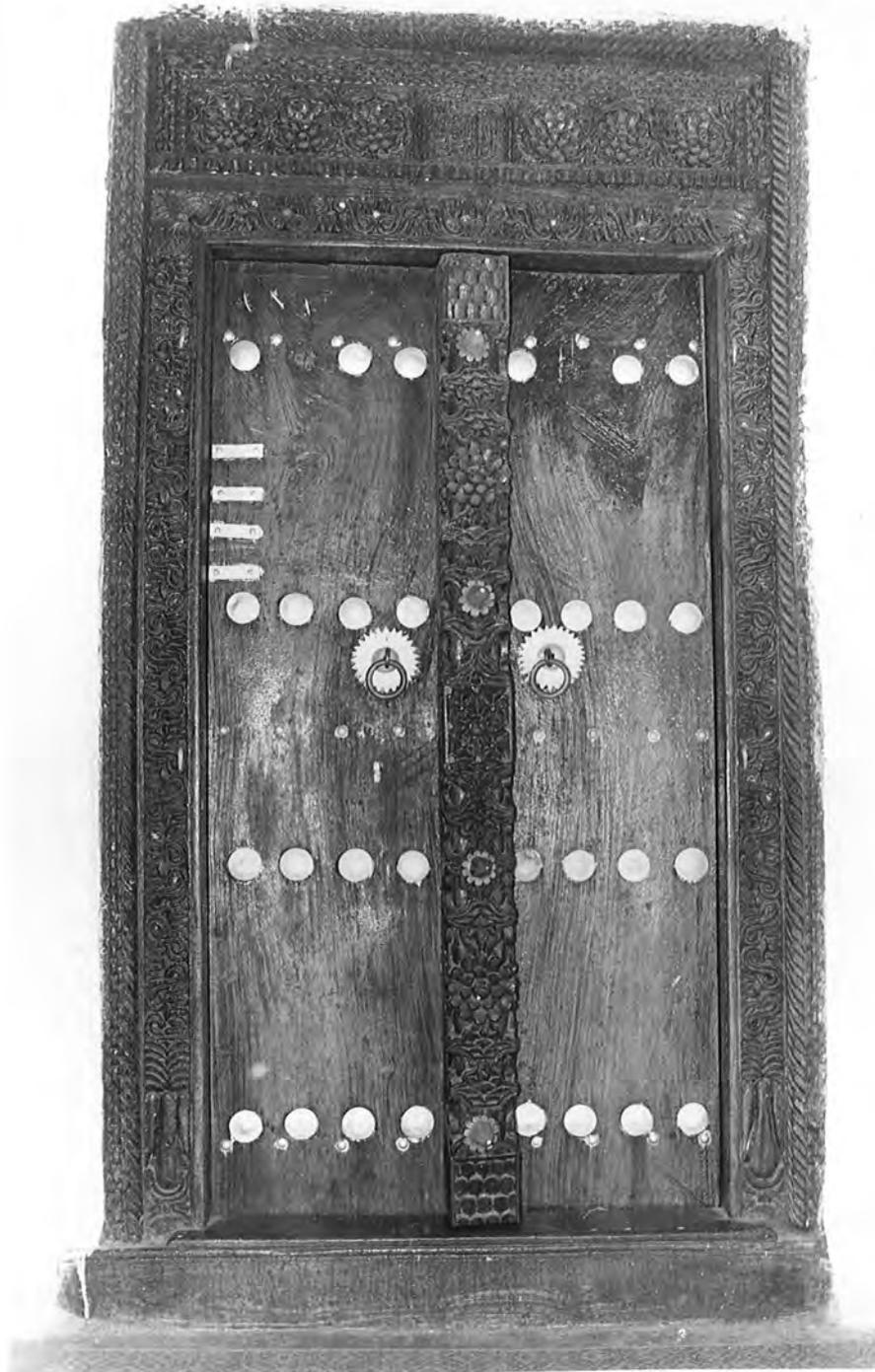
LAMU MOSQUE DOOR, DATED 1876. SHOWING ELEMENTS OF  
THE ROSETTE DESIGN MODIFIED



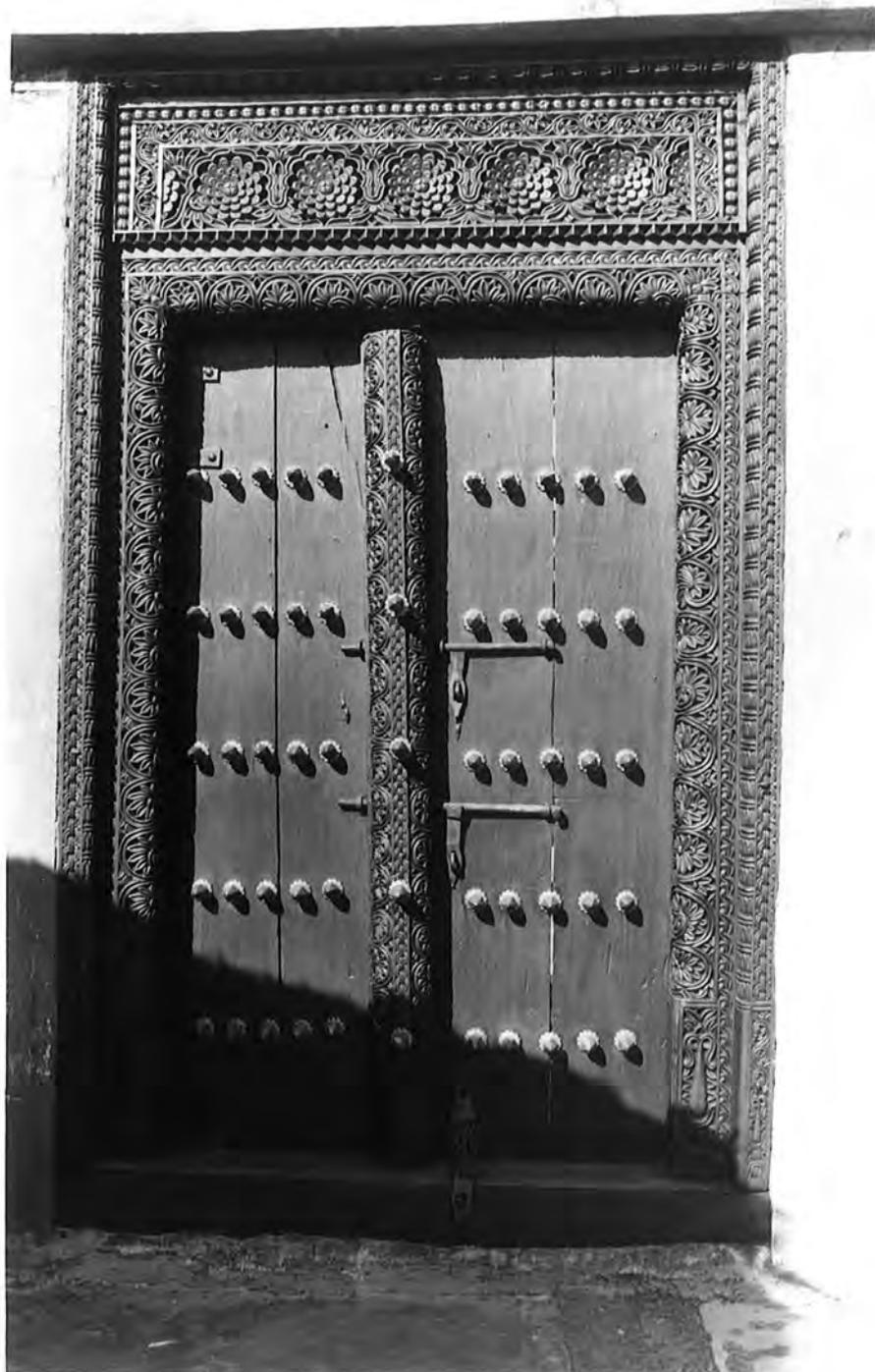
MOMBASA DOOR SHOWING A SIMPLIFIED PATTERN ON THE FRAME



ROSETTE DOOR, MOMBASA



INSIDE DOOR, BASHEIKH MOSQUE, MOMBASA



LATE ROSETTE DOOR WITH ROUNDED DOOR JAMBS, MOMBASA

The construction of these doors is interesting. The frame and lintel served no functional purpose and were purely decorative. The lintel rests above the frame, which is joined together only on a two dimensional plane and the narrow decorative outer edge, or beading work acts both as a cosmetic finish and as a locking mechanism to hold the parts in place.[plate 30] The doors are not integral to the building and could be added or removed.

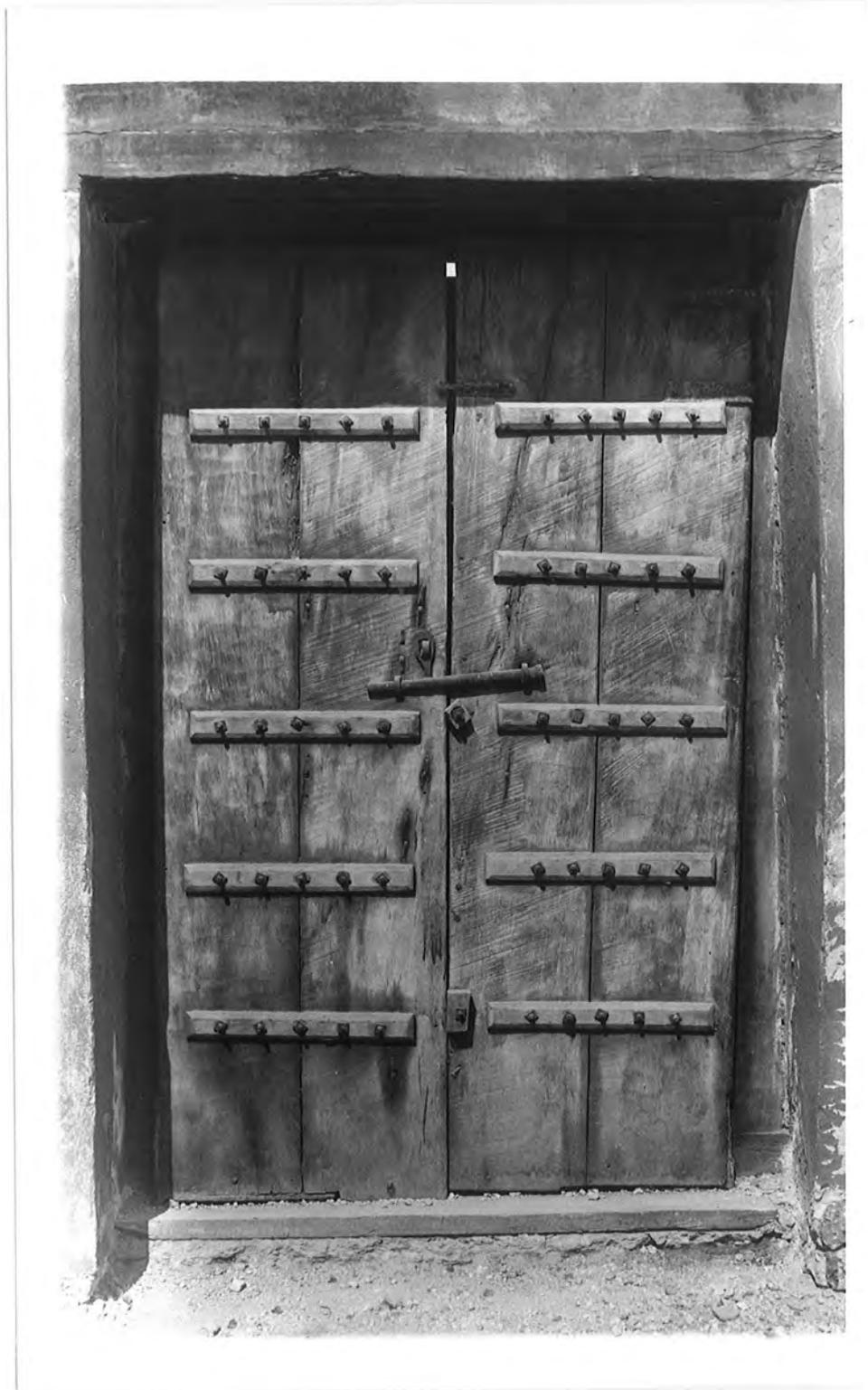
Earlier doors tend to be narrower and smaller, but increase in size during the 19th century. They are made up of many separate pieces of wood fitted together, even the door panels are generally made from two or more planks which are joined by strips behind and fastened by the iron nails, which act as decoration on the front.[plate 31] There were no hinges and door leaves were hung by letting them into round holes pivoted on a mortise and tenon principle at the top and bottom and were hung behind the frame. Nowadays most doors have been rehung on metal hinges, but in the older doors, holes are still usually visible.[plate 32] The doors were barred inside by heavy sliding locks. The decoration was intended for outward show only and the elaborate array of outside locks added to the already impressive display. The use of brass studs and beaten brass work only dates to the later 19th century and was most evident in Zanzibar.

Plain iron studded doors seem to be traditional to the Swahili coast, as both the doors of Arabia and India usually have either coffered or carved door panels. Important windows were also occasionally carved and fitted with iron bars - glass, even today, in windows is not

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OPEN AIR CARPENTRY SHOP, ZANZIBAR. OLD DOORS FOR SALE.  
NOTICE THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DOORS



BACK OF A LATE 19TH CENTURY CARVED DOOR, SHOWING CONSTRUCTION

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OLD DOOR REHUNG ON HINGES, BUT THE TRADITIONAL PIVOT HOLE  
IS STILL VISIBLE. NOTE ALSO THE LARGE  
ROUND HEADED NAILS ON THIS DOOR

DIAGRAM OF AN EAST AFRICAN CARVED DOOR OF THE MID 15<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

FIG. III

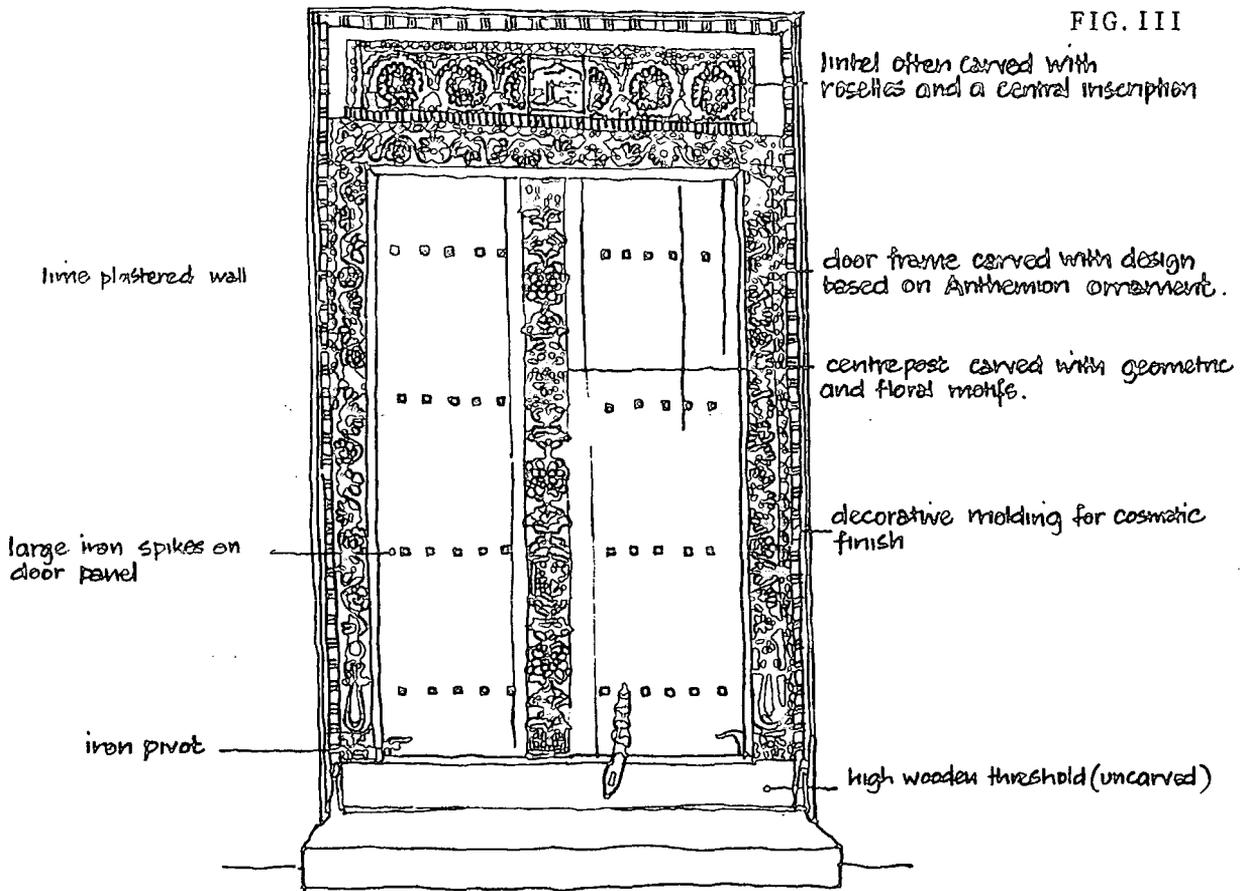
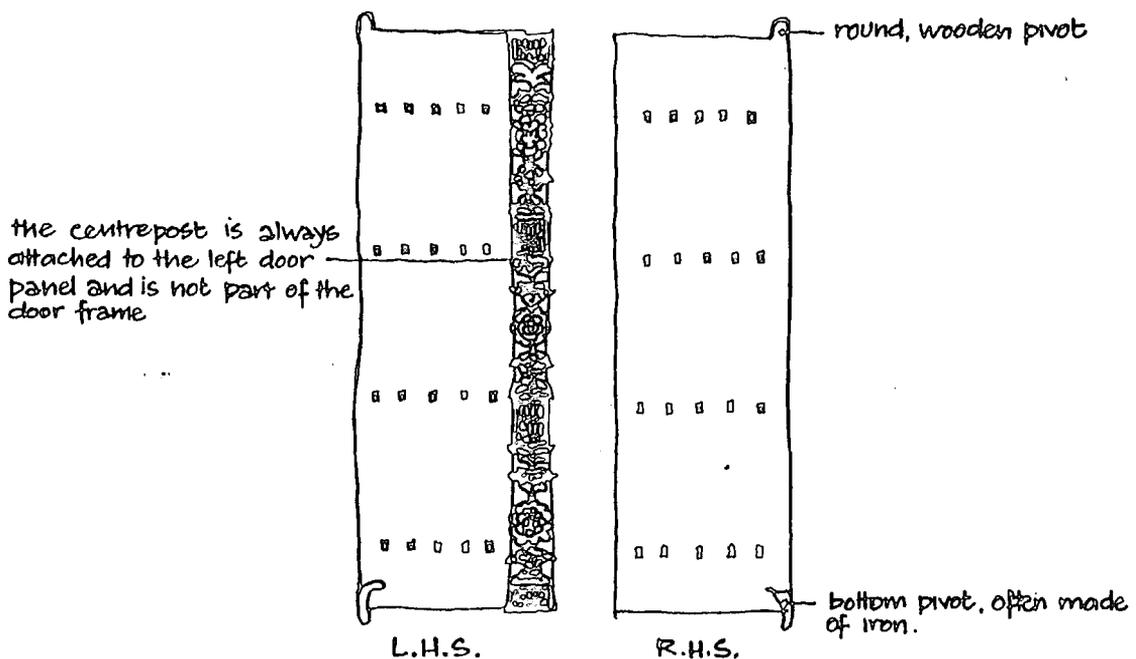


DIAGRAM SHOWING THE TRADITIONAL PIVOT CONSTRUCTION FOR DOOR PANELS



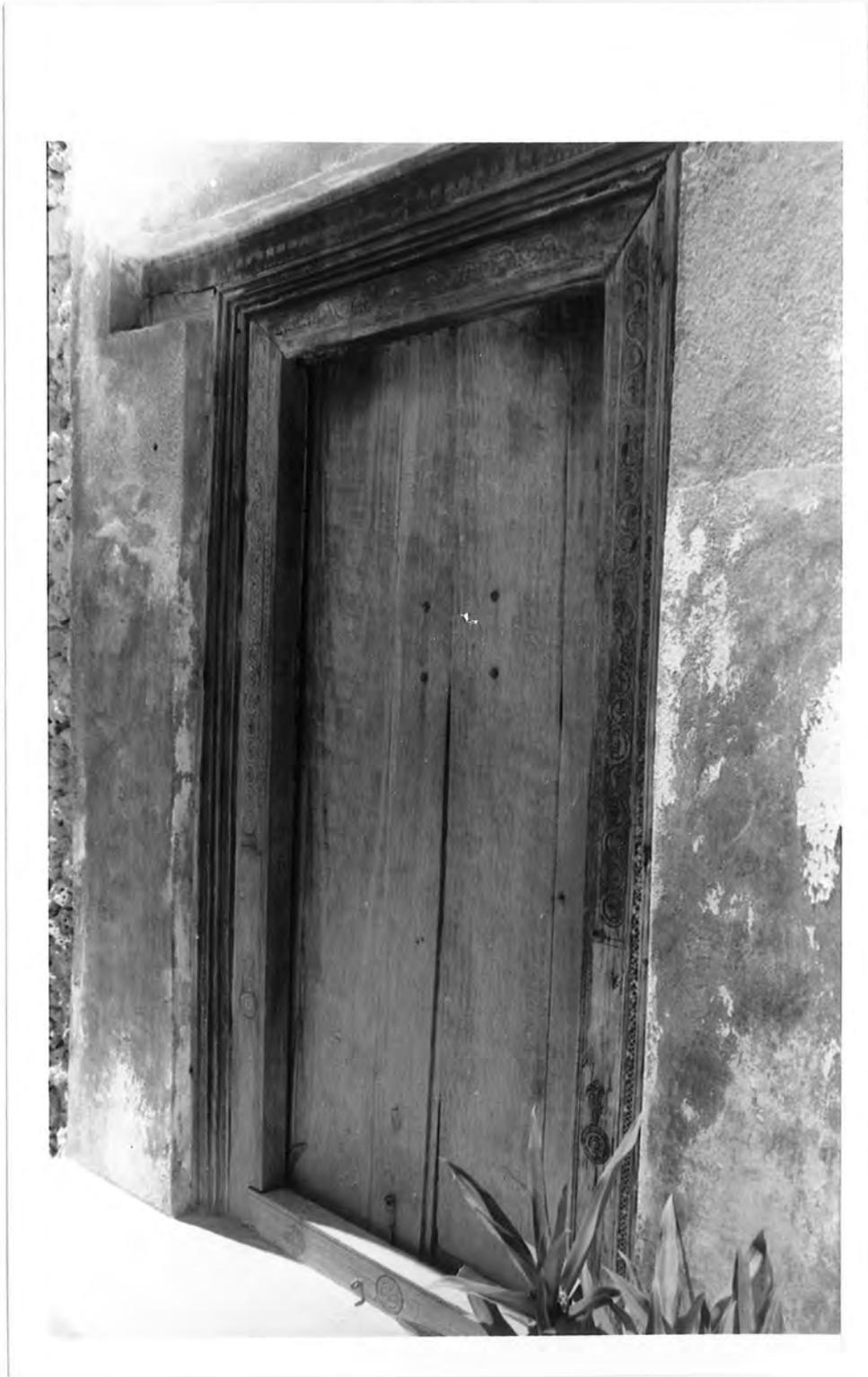
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widespread. The feature of a wicket gate or small door set within a door, often seen in Omani doors, is rarely seen on the Swahili coast except in fort entrances. Older doors tend to be more heavily constructed and generally made from expensive and durable hardwood. The more prestigious doors do not use planking for the door panels. [plate 23]

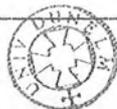
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The centrepiece was made from an elaborately carved post attached to one side of the door leaf so that when closed it masked the join and could not be prized open easily. This feature calls to mind in the sack of Mombasa in 1505 how the Portuguese had to force the doors open with axes and battering rams. (31) Barbosa, in his description of Mombasa in 1517, pointedly remarks that the wood is well fitted with excellent joinery work. (32) The centrepost is a particularly prominent feature in the doors of the Swahili coast and the designs used would appear to follow a long established precedent. Significantly, the Lamu doors have this feature and the Giriama people, who live close to Mombasa, used carved posts for funeral monuments and, although the designs tend to favour simpler forms, the basic combination of round floral shapes and areas of geometric pattern are apparent and there must be some connection.

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SIU-TYPE DOOR, LAMU



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SIU DOORS

Not far from Lamu, on the island of Pate in a town called Siu, doors of a completely different construction and form survive. The lintel overlaps the door frame and the patterns are engraved and painted rather than carved into the wood. [plate 33] No dates survive for these doors and due to the delicacy and increasing faintness of the incised patterns, they are hard to photograph successfully. This type of door is not seen in Mombasa, nor in Zanzibar, and appears to be a purely regional eccentricity. It is possible that a group of craftsmen from the disintegrating Moghul Empire found their way to Siu and tried to reproduce the inlaid jewelled splendour of the Moghul court in more modest materials. It is also possible that they show Egyptian influence. Siu enjoyed a reputation for inlaid bone and ivory work during the 18th and 19th centuries. (33)

In the opinion of Mr J. de V. Allen these doors are the oldest to be found on the coast of East Africa and would have been similar to the ones admired by the Portuguese. Their simple but clever construction, whereby the lintel acts as a clasp to keep the frame together, is what he thinks prompted the Portuguese to praise the carpentry of the doors they saw in Kilwa and Mombasa. Interestingly these doors are the only ones on the coast which tend not to have a centrepost and often have geometric patterns painted on the door panels. The wood used for the finest Siu doors was a black wood that was extremely hard to carve. (34)

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FIG. IV

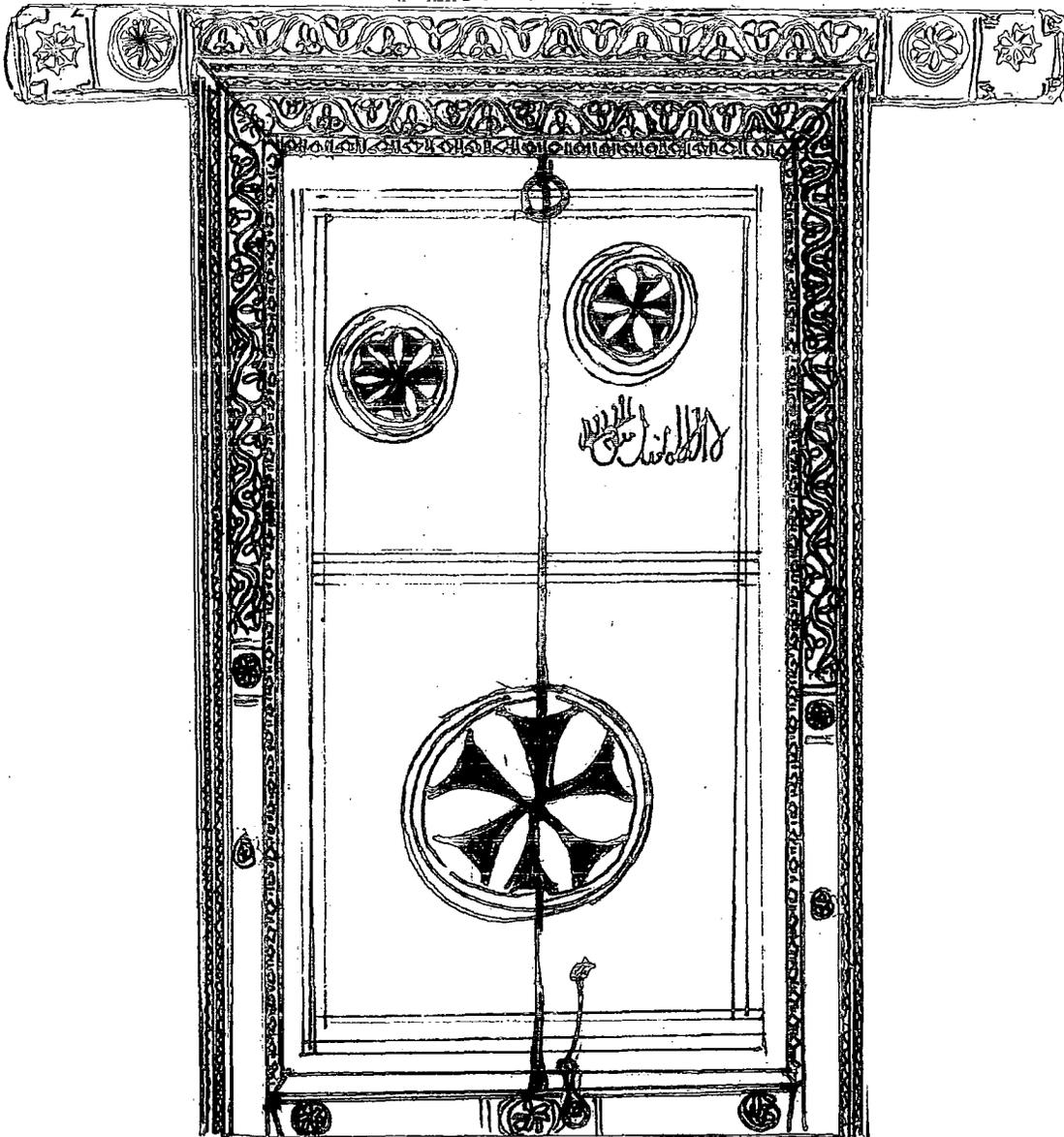
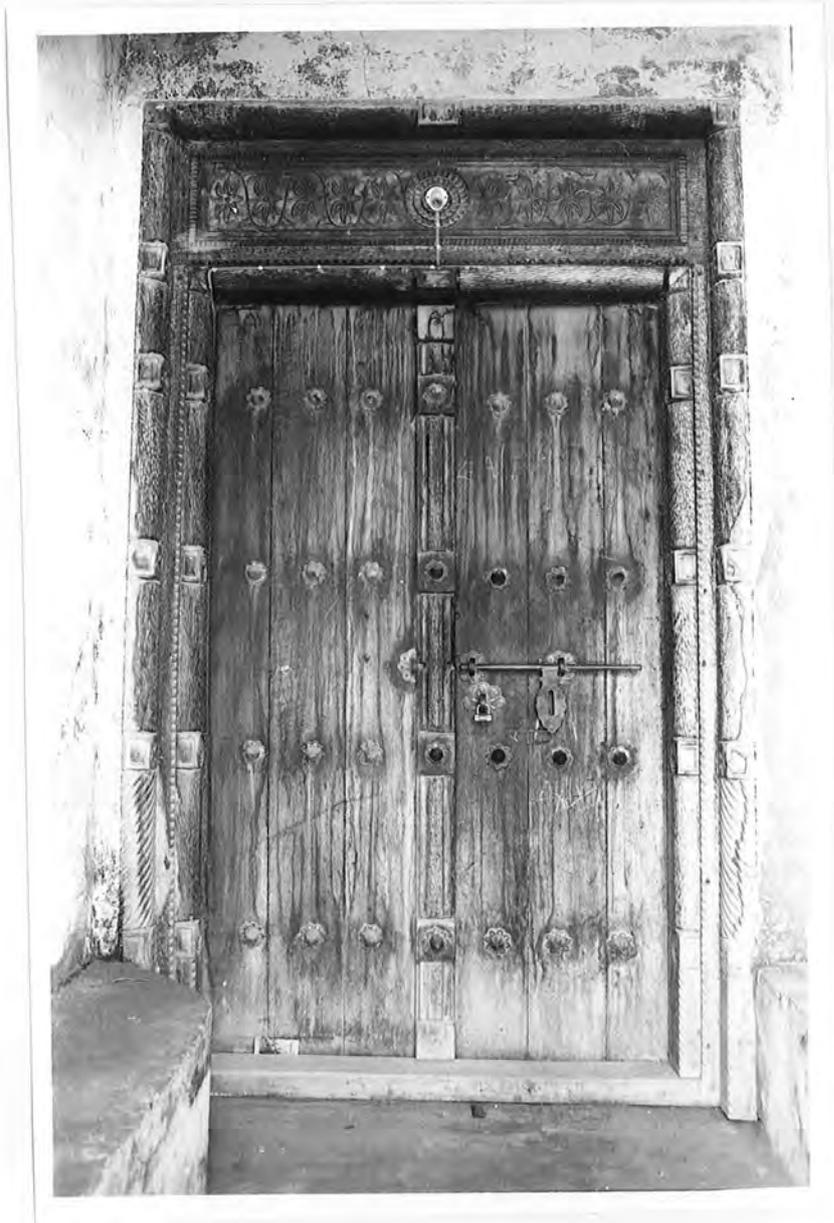


DIAGRAM OF A SIU STYLE DOOR. SEE HOW THE LINTEL OVERLAPS THE DOOR FRAME AND THE DELICATE DESIGNS ARE PAINTED AND ENGRAVED RATHER THAN CARVED. THERE IS NO CENTREPOST AND THE DOOR PANELS ARE PAINTED IN BLACK AND WHITE WITH GEOMETRIC PATTERNS. THERE IS AN IRON RING AT THE TOP OF THE DOOR AND AN IRON LOCK AT THE BOTTOM.



LAMU DOOR SHOWING UNUSUAL DESIGN AND TECHNIQUE

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The patterns on the Siu doors seem to have been designed for another medium and the three dimensional quality usual in carving work is not exploited. An extreme example of an inappropriate approach is clearly demonstrated in a most unusual door in Lamu, which is undated but from its position on the reclaimed waterfront is presumed post 1830. The lintel has a floral design lightly engraved and the door frame is flecked to appear like wood. It is as if the craftsman has faithfully reproduced a drawing or a painting of a door in wood. (35) [plate 34]

The plain crosshatching or honeycomb work found on more recent Siu doors, which are still carved today, is the simplest form of decoration to execute when using a square ended chisel. The technique has been linked to the Bajuni people. Their doors do not use the proper Siu style construction, though still feature an overlapping lintel. [plates 35 & 36] The Bajuni consider themselves a branch of the Swahili and are a seafaring group who settled in Siu and the Lamu islands. They used to build the mtepe, sewn boats, and more recently, the jahazi, small coastal Lamu dhows. They are said to have migrated from Somali in the 17th century, though ultimately they claim Arab lineage. The Bajuni traditionally decorated the mtepe with flag designs and 'dhow eyes', simple boss and star shapes. They used to fly small flags along the strange beak-like prow, strips of red, white and black cloth, the colours favoured in the Lamu houses. The mtepe were used for transporting the mangrove or boriti poles and

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BAJUNI STYLE DOOR, LAMU



BAJUNI STYLE DOOR, LAMU

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would travel in fleets up and down the coast and were to be seen until c.1920. The jahazi which the Bajuni build nowadays derive from an Indian type of craft. (36)

The character of much of the decoration in the Lamu area shows signs of a rather different cultural background from that of Mombasa and Zanzibar. It is possible that the dominant influence is Somali and Ethiopian based, showing a Red Sea influence that is not so marked in the settlements further south which have closer connections with the Gulf area and India.

The guilloche, or interlaced designs, seen on the 16th century Siu minbar, the Lamu 17th century siwas, and in early carved stonework ornament are not found on 19th century doors from Zanzibar, though the Bajuni crosswork patterns may represent a late and simplified interpretation of this style. (37)

#### FRAMED AND UNFRAMED DOORS OF THE SWAHILI COAST

The oldest mosque in Mombasa, the Mandhry Mosque, founded 1571/2, though doubtless repaired and altered several times since then, has a small main door set within an arch, where only the lintel is carved.[plate 37] The Basheikh Mosque of similar age also has a small front door with a carved lintel. Inside both the Mandhry and Basheikh Mosques are various carved doors, obviously added at different stages. Probably one of the earliest is an interior door of the Mandhry Mosque carved with rosette and palmette shapes enclosed in roundels along the lintel.[plate 38] The frame is left plain and the carved centrepiece is unusually narrow. A door in Lamu behind the

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PLATE 37



DOOR OF THE MANDHRY MOSQUE, MOMBASA

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DOOR FROM INSIDE THE MANDHRY MOSQUE, MOMBASA

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fort, [plate 39] has a lintel with three decorative bosses carved out of one piece of wood surrounded by a rope or chevron pattern. Notice the cowrie shell design carved on the two outer bosses, while the centre has a geometric rosette design. No one to my knowledge has ventured to put a date to this door, but it certainly has an old appearance. Ornamental bosses and cable moulding are the one form of coral carved ornament that survive from the ruined mosques of the abandoned Swahili settlements, where the woodwork has long since rotted and disappeared.

Several doors in Mombasa have carved lintels, large and elaborate centreposts and a decorative outer edging of chain, rope or a type of bead and reelwork pattern, but the frame is left uncarved. Perhaps this represents a stage before the adoption of the decorated frame or perhaps the owner did not care for the design. Possibly a decorated frame indicated Busaidi affiliations, Persian or Shirazi ancestry, or noble rank. It is not unlike a border of a Persian rug or the designs used in the embroidered bands called tiraz that used to embellish the neckline of the ceremonial robes, joha of the high ranking nobility. [plate 40]

The joha was a dark outer robe decorated along the edges with gold, red or black braid and was worn over the white kanzu. It was a clothing fashion introduced from Oman and in the early 19th century the decoration, in keeping with strict Ibadi puritanism, was restrained, but during Seyyid Bargash's reign the braiding became broader and the patterns increasingly elaborate. (38)

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LAMU DOOR CARVED WITH BOSSES

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PHOTOGRAPH OF SEYYID HAMED B. THUWEIN OF ZANZIBAR, 1895, FLANKED BY SIR ARTHUR HARDINGE AND GENERAL MATHEWS. NOTICE THE ELABORATE ROBES WORN AND THE STRIPS ROUND THE NECK

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The Lamu residences of the Swahili nobility had plasterwork bands of decoration round the entrances, while the old ceremonial drums of the former Swahili rulers of Zanzibar show similar bands of decoration as well. Oral tradition maintains that these Zanzibar drums date back to the 17th century. [plate 41] They certainly must predate 1865, when the last Mwenye Mkuu died. There is another set of drums belonging to the Vumba people of Wasini island, which are also said to date back to the 17th century and they too are decorated with carved bands. (40) At one stage every noble Swahili family owned a set of drums which were brought out on special occasions, but only the grandest were carved. It thus seems that originally a band or frame of decoration was reserved only for persons of the highest nobility in East Africa, but under the Busaidi the fashion became more widespread. It is perhaps of significance to note that neither the Lamu plasterwork nor the Zanzibar drums include the rosette, although a simplified anthemion pattern can be identified. The rosette in floral rather than geometric form, seems to be a later arrival in the ornamental repertoire of the Swahili coast. It often has a Persian connotation, as well as a Hindu connection.

#### CONNECTIONS BETWEEN DOOR CARVING AND THE CARVED DECORATION ON DHOWS

The lintels of these unframed Mombasa doors generally have a central rosette and often a design of palmettes set within a wavy line or tendril. This design perhaps represents an updating of old fashioned roundels and bosses and a variation on straight rosettes. Plates 42 to 46 illustrate a gradual progression away from enclosed roundel designs. A running foliate design is commonly seen in decorative work

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PLATE 41



CEREMONIAL DRUM OF THE MWENYE MKUU, TITLE GIVEN TO THE FORMER HEAD OF THE SWAHILI ROYAL FAMILY IN ZANZIBAR. THE DRUM IS CARVED WITH BANDS OF FOLIATE PATTERNS SIMILAR TO THOSE SEEN IN PLASTERWORK AND CARVING.

ZANZIBAR MUSEUM



CARVED DOOR, MOMBASA, WITH SIMPLIFIED DECORATED FRAME

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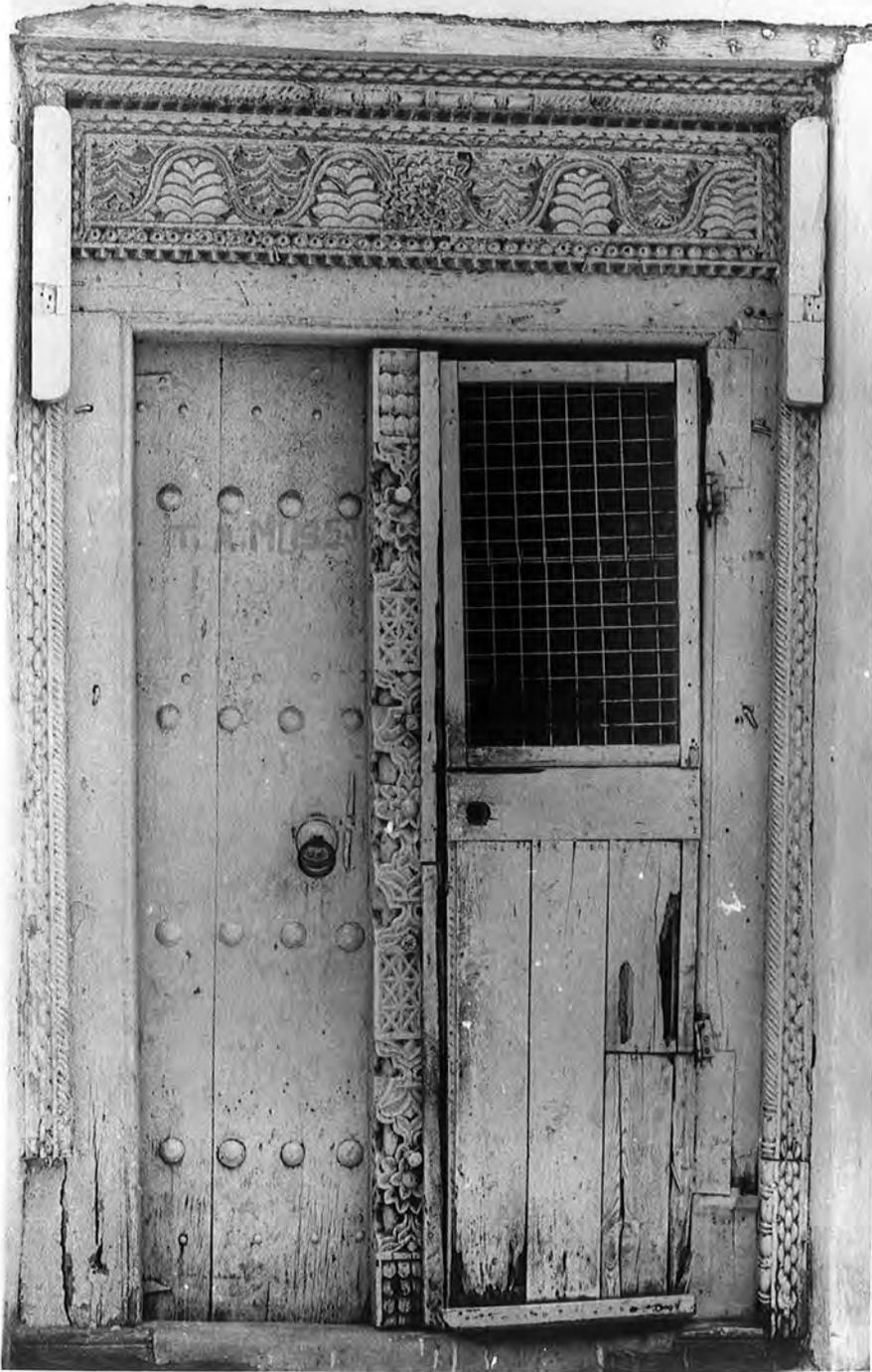
PLATE 43



UNFRAMED DOOR, MOMBASA



UNFRAMED DOOR, MOMBASA



UNFRAMED DOOR, MOMBASA, SHOWING FULLY EVOLVED WAVY LINE PATTERN



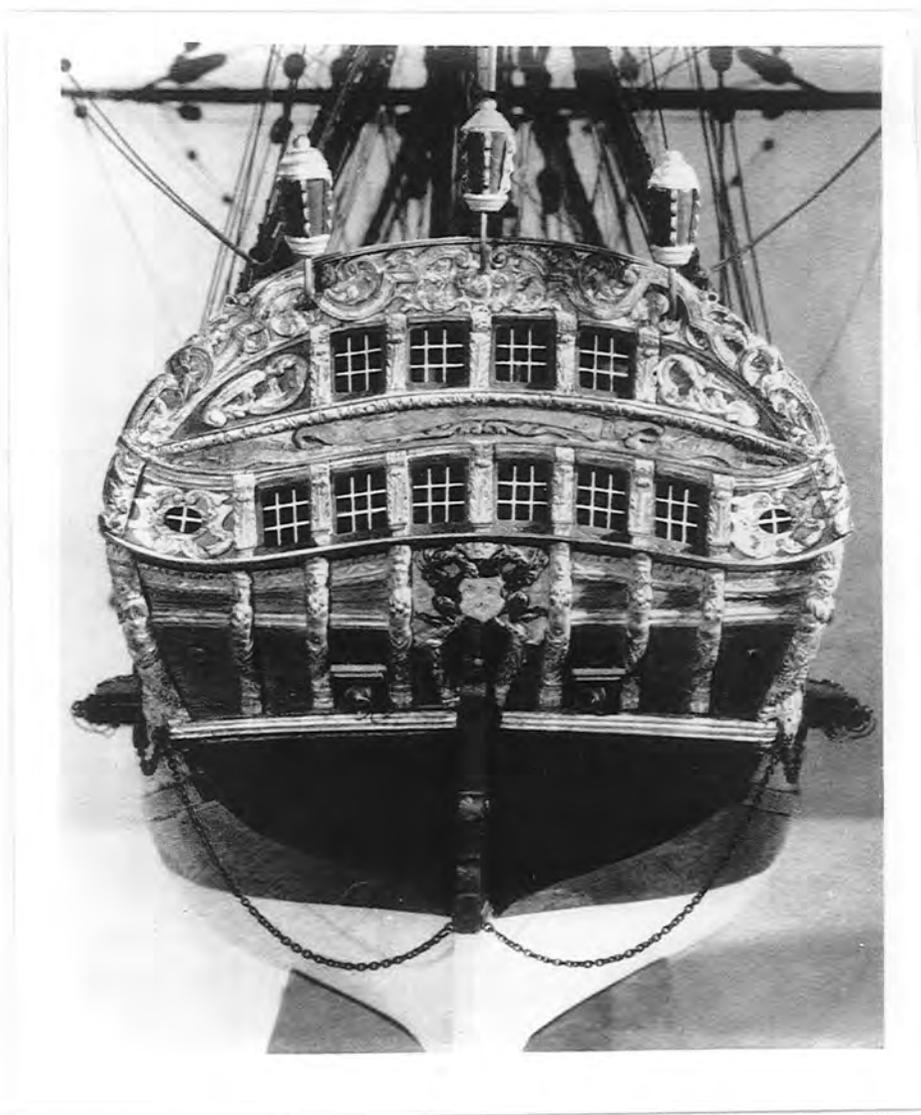
UNFRAMED DOOR, MOMBASA, RUNNING DESIGN OF PALMETTES

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along the bows and sterns of ships. Sullivan's sketch of an East African baghlah c.1870, craft, he says, built on all parts of the coast and by far the most numerous class to be seen, shows carved scroll work along the bows. (41) The finest and largest baghlahs were traditionally built at Sur, in Oman, and were the most lavishly decorated of all the ocean going dhows. The Arabian baghlah ceased to be built after 1920, but the Indian ghanjah of very similar design can still be seen occasionally. [plates 50, 51 & 52] The flat transom design of the baghlah was said to have been first inspired by the Spanish galleons, (42) and it is likely that the decorative work was as well. Certainly the Indiamen, which were well known in these parts during the 18th century, were very ornately carved. [plate 47] There were large ship-building yards in Bombay, which built British East Indiamen as well as dhows. It seems more than likely that the expertise travelled and as the doors along this coast are usually made of the same wood as used in shipbuilding, it is not hard to imagine how the decoration could become interrelated. Door carving appears to have evolved as a side line of dhow building, where the carpenter would do it as a lucrative adjunct to his business. To begin with there was no separation between carpentry for dhows and carpentry for domestic purposes. The favoured use of planking and the way a door is made up of many pieces suggest that it is a pleasant way of using up material left over from the dhows.

Unfortunately dhows do not survive as well as doors, but there is one photographed on the beach at Mirbat, in Oman, which shows a panel of carved decoration along the stern. The design of a weaving tendril

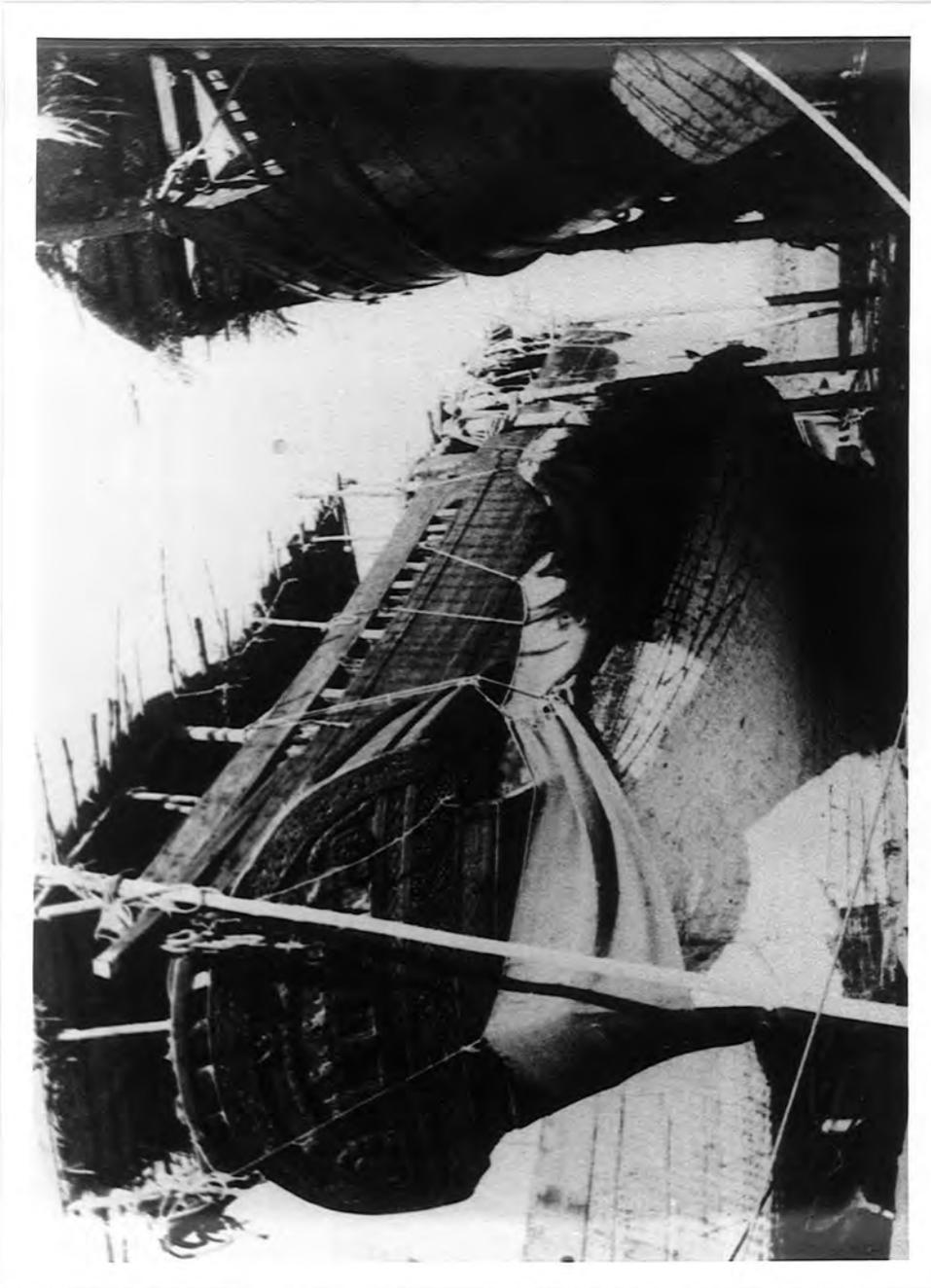
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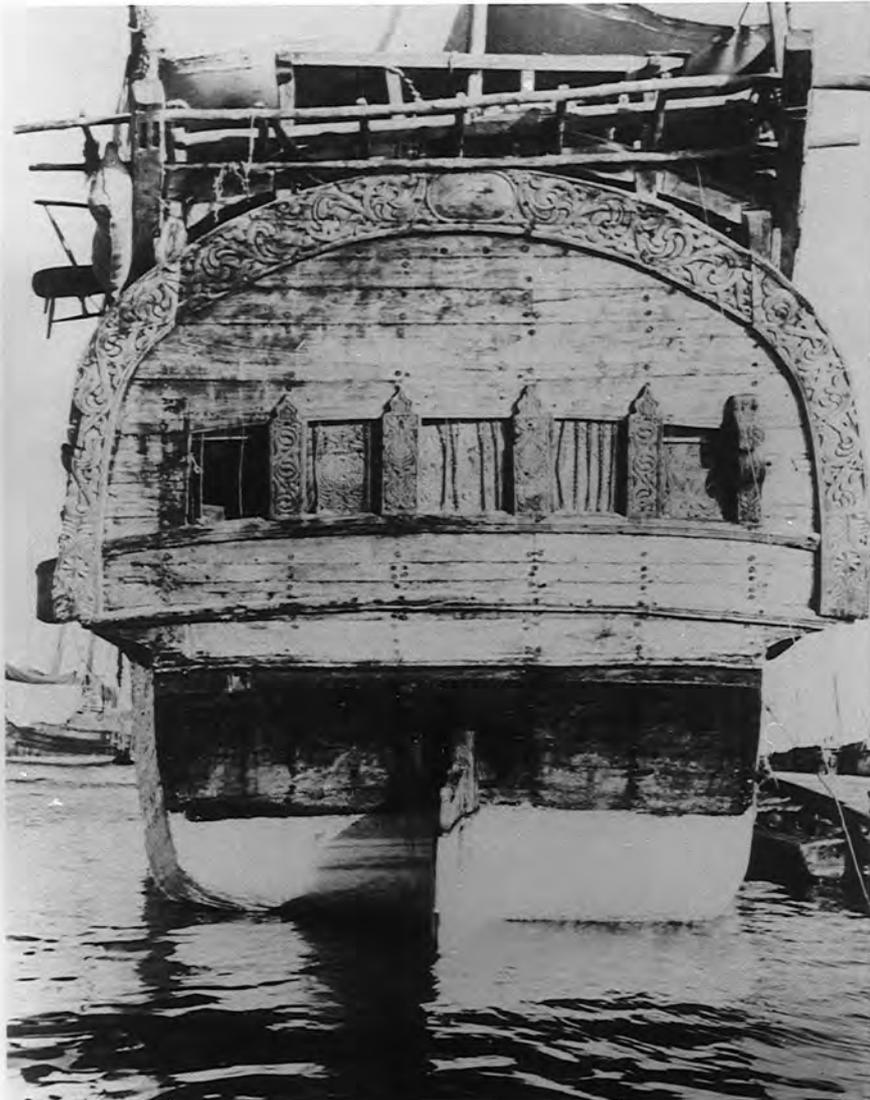
SHOWING DECORATIVE WORK ON THE  
STERN OF AN 18TH CENTURY EAST INDIAMAN  
(Hansen)



INNER DOOR TO THE FORT AT ZANZIBAR, BUILT c. 1784.  
THE CARVING ON THE LINTEL IS REMINISCENT OF THE  
DECORATIVE WORK FOUND ON THE INDIAMEN OF THE PERIOD



DECORATIVE WORK ON THE STERN OF A SMALL BAGHLAH  
(Villiers)



*This view of the stern gives greater detail of the carved designs. These windows look out from the stern cabin, which is often used as a storeroom. The fore'd bulkhead of the cabin, which is recessed under the poop, is formed of a number of carved panels with*

*two panels on the port side forming a door. One perhaps surprised at the trouble taken by the owner to beautify this part of the ship, which is seldom seen effect in the deep shadow of the poop.*

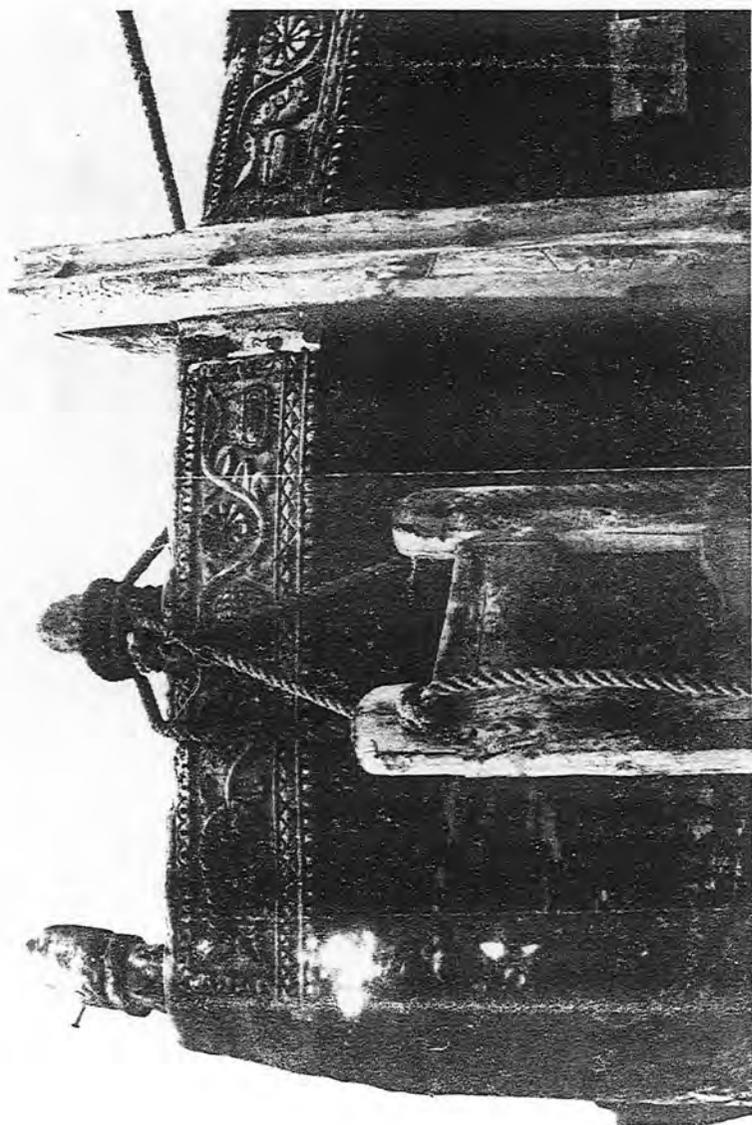
52

STERN DECORATION OF A GHAJAH  
(John Jewell)



STERN DECORATION OF AN INDIAN GHANJAH  
(John Jewell)

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DECORATION ON THE STERN OF A DHOW BEACHED AT MIRBAT, OMAN  
(P. M. da Costa)



A GHAJAH UNDER SAIL, MOMBASA  
(John Jewell)

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combined with rosettes gives some idea of what the decoration on the smaller dhows may have looked like in the 19th century. [plate 53]

#### DATING THE DOORS

Dating these doors is extremely difficult as there is a tendency to think that less elaborate and linear designs are more traditional and therefore older. This is not necessarily the case, as a less wealthy house owner could only afford a small and less elaborate door, and in certain circles, if the owner held very strict Islamic views, realistic portrayal was frowned upon, and Quranic inscriptions and geometric patterns were the full extent of decoration allowed. However, generally speaking, the appearance of a rosette in the design suggests a date in the 19th century. Two doors in Mombasa have a strange lintel design of half rosettes and a stylised palmette is often seen. These doors provide local alternatives to the Busaidi doors in Zanzibar, but the appearance of corrupted and misunderstood pattern elements suggest they are the work of copyists rather than innovators and represent a derivation rather than a precursor of the designs brought in from Oman. There are many of this simpler door type to be seen in the Swahili suburbs of Zanzibar, which we know was an area not built up until after 1858. (43) In Zanzibar the doors appear in single storey makuti roofed houses, but in Mombasa these doors are only seen in stone houses and possibly date earlier. Not many of this type are seen in Lamu, where the Bajuni carving style dominates local fashion.

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UNUSUAL LINTEL DESIGN ON A DOOR IN MOMBASA



WINDOW IN MOMBASA, GEOMETRIC DESIGN

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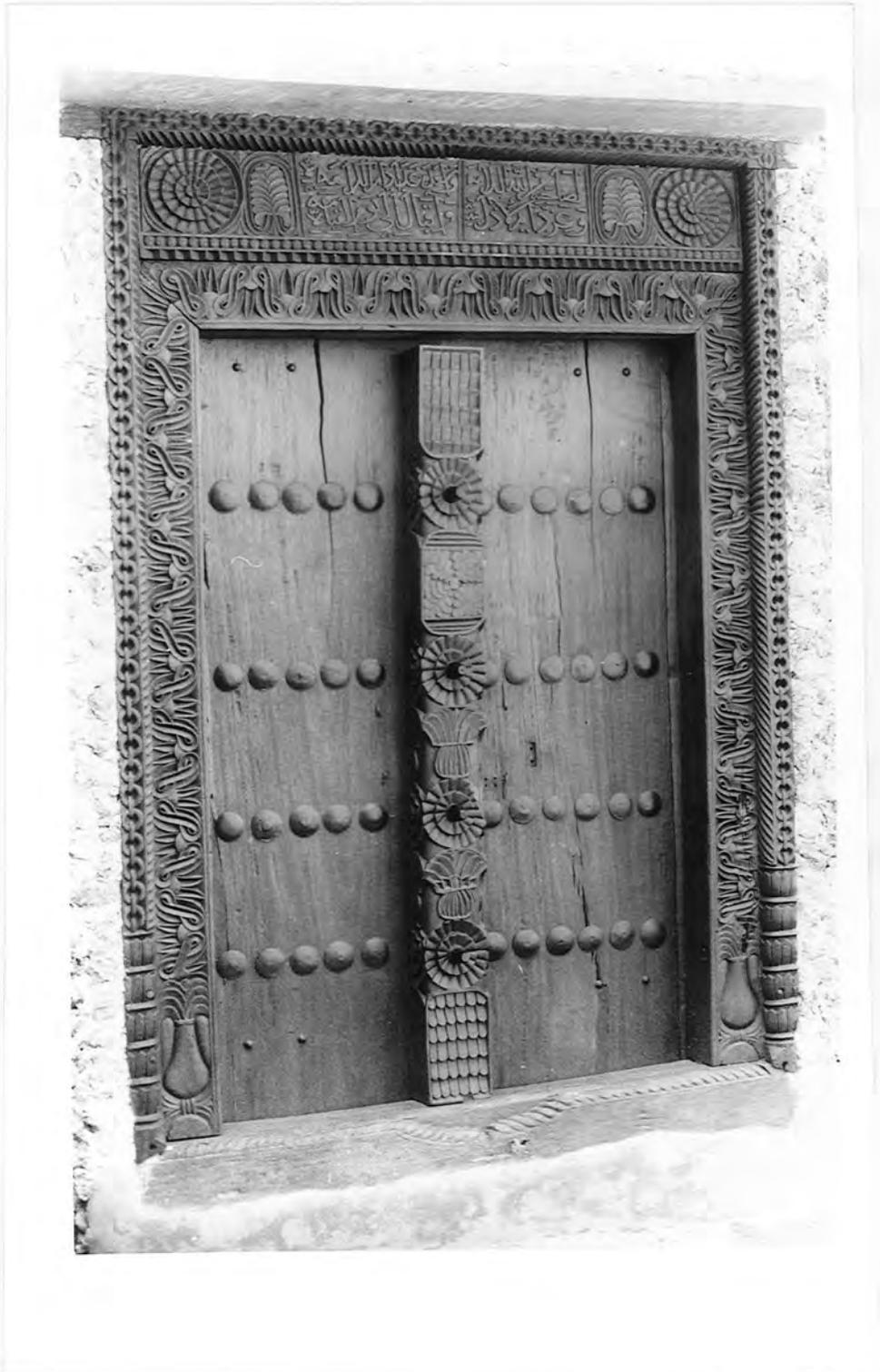
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MAZRUI DOORS

There is an interesting group of doors in Mombasa which connect closely in style to two doors from the palace of Gazi, one of which is now in the Fort Jesus Museum, [plate 56] and the other, a door leading to the inner courtyard, still remains at Gazi. [plate 57] Gazi was the home of Mbarak b. Rashid al-Mazrui, who as the senior surviving son of the last Mazrui governor of Mombasa, Rashid b. Salim, deposed in 1837, was the natural leader of an anti-Busaidi faction. He devoted his life to unsuccessful efforts to re-establish Mombasa as an independent city state under Mazrui leadership and was a rallying point for malcontents and rebels. His heavy handed intrigues and disruptive behaviour lead to his eventual downfall in 1896, when he went into permanent exile and his lands and properties were forfeited. (44)

Somewhat inappropriately, the inscription in the centre of the lintel of Mbarak's front door at Gazi reads thus: 'The peace of God on its owner! May he grant him the abode of honour on the morrow! Perpetual glory and no disgrace, and good fortune until the day of resurrection.' (45) It is a large imposing square headed door. At either end of the lintel is a rosette and inside that a shape that most calls to mind the sweet sugary biscuit that can be bought in Arab bakeries called a jeleby, but should perhaps more properly be referred to as a palmette. On the frame of the door is a carved design of what appears to be fish hooks and spiky flowers. At the base of the jamb is the familiar strange urn-like object. Around the outer edge of the frame is rope and chain edging, at the raised

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MAIN DOOR, GAZI

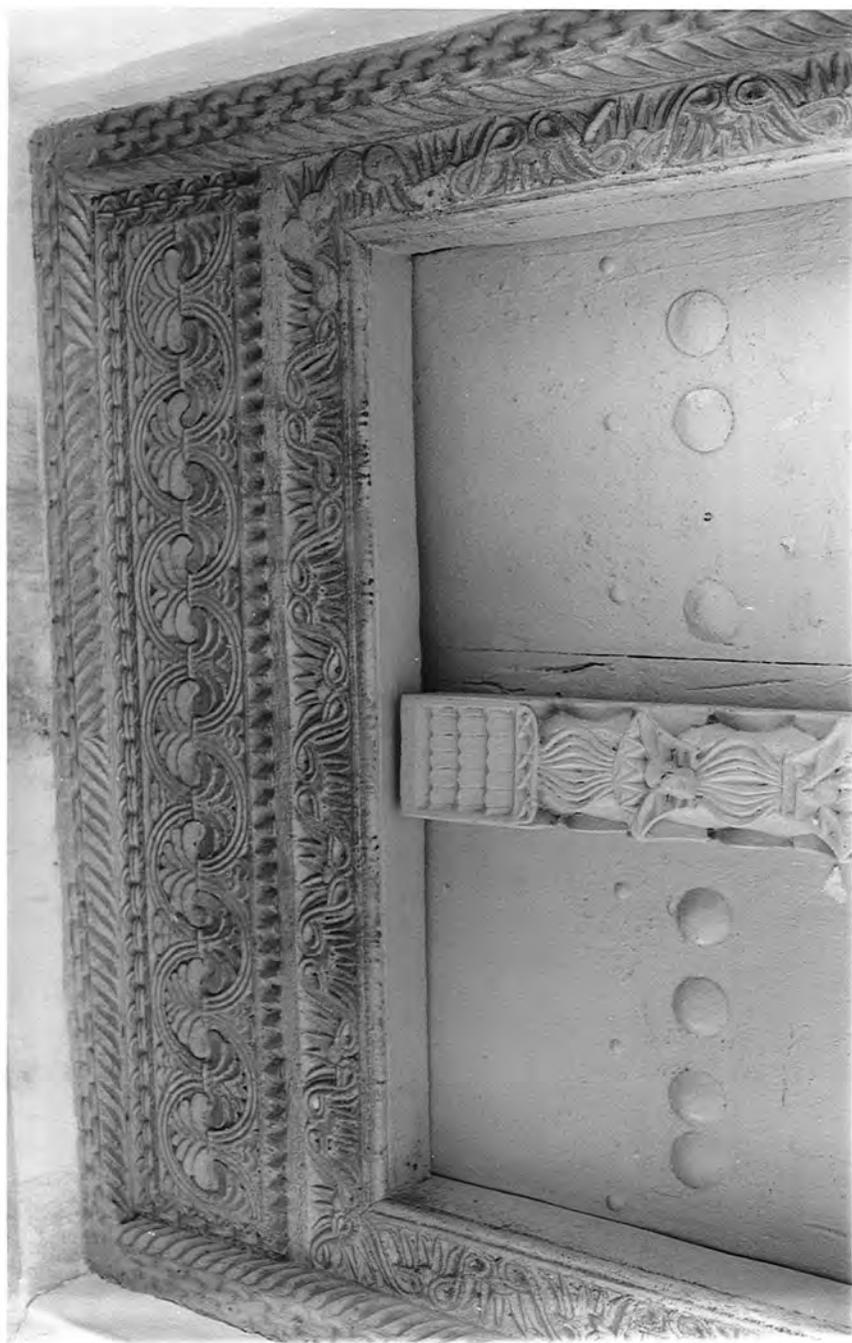


SECOND DOOR, GAZI

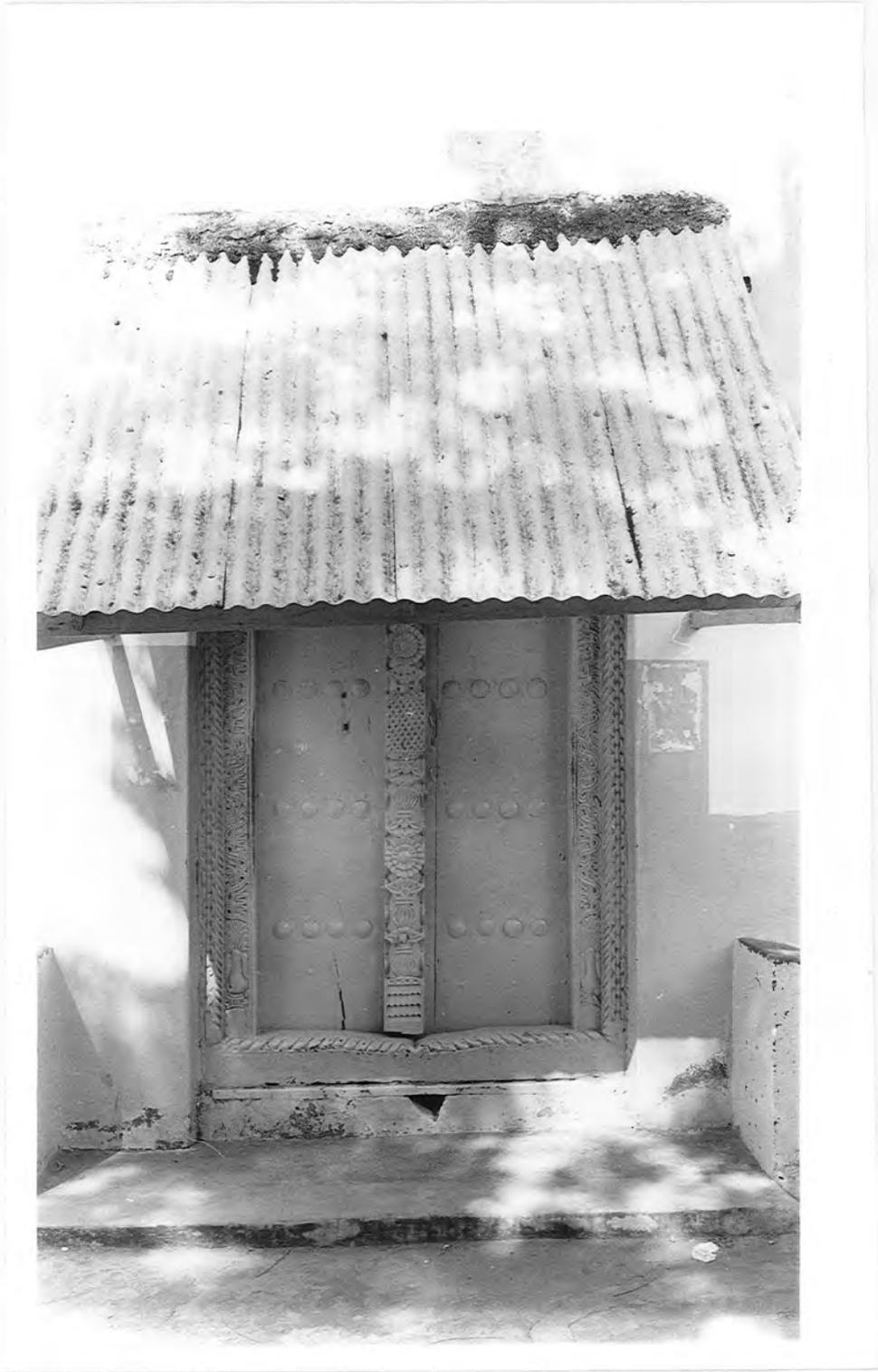
threshold is a carved rope. The door panels are plain with rows of round headed iron nails. The heavy door post is made up of rosettes, with pointed iron studs, an ornament that looks more like a sheaf of corn than a lotus flower or fleur-de-lys, and areas of geometric design, and fish scales.

A door in very similar style is found at the Shikeli Mosque in Mombasa. [plates 58 & 59] Note in particular the design on the centrepost and feature of the rope at the threshold. The lintel has been carved with a repeating pattern of alternating palmettes and the door is heavily coated with blue paint. This mosque was founded in 1793 and commemorates Governor Ahmed Mazrui's haji to Mecca and therefore has special connections with the Mazrui family. (46) Another door which falls into the same group, is an orange painted door, close to the site of Leven House, formerly a Mazrui property lent to the British during their first brief protectorate 1824-26. [plates 60 & 61] Situated at the top of an access route to the waterfront and area of warehouses belonging to the Mazrui family, it was once an important merchant house. The door has a most unusual lintel design of what looks like bottles or flasks. Note also the rope across the door step and the centrepost design. A similar flask or bottle design is found on the inner door at Gazi and on one other door in Mombasa [plate 62] where the remains of a rope on the threshold can also be seen. The house, though extensively modernised, was obviously once a wealthy Arab mansion and has two fine internal carved doors leading from an inner audience hall.

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UPPER SECTION OF THE DOOR TO THE SHIKELI MOSQUE, MOMBASA



LOWER SECTION OF THE DOOR TO THE SHIKELI MOSQUE, MOMBASA



UPPER SECTION OF THE DOOR CLOSE TO LEVEN STEPS, MOMBASA



LOWER SECTION OF THE DOOR CLOSE TO LEVEN STEPS, MOMBASA



DOOR OFF THIKA STREET, MOMBASA

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There is one other door in Mombasa, which has the feature of the rope across the threshold and fits stylistically with this group. [plate 63] Situated in front of a mosque, it once lay on a main access route to the port, which was blocked in 1902 when the Jivanjee family built a large Bohra mosque overlooking the harbour. (47) The thick frame of this door is decorated with a honeycombed or crosshatched pattern surrounded by a heavy rope, similar in design to the frame of the inner door at Gazi. [plate 57] It has no extra lintel however and only an upper edging of egg and dart work but, despite much wear and tear, a rope is just visible at the step. Less elaborate than the other doors of the group, this was probably once a port office of some kind rather than a main entrance to a grand family residence or mosque.

Plate 64 shows the final door included in this group. Although there is no rope at the threshold and the centrepiece follows a more standard design, the frame and lintel fit stylistically. It is positioned outside the walled gavana or largely Arab quarter of town and again has an important strategic placing, at the head of a major access route to the waterfront and a flight of steps leading to a landing jetty. Mombasa, like Lamu, used to be divided into mitaa where people of the same family group tended to live together and this house is in the old mitaa Malindi, where descendants of the family of the sheikh or prince of Malindi used to live. After the defeat of Mombasa by the Portuguese in 1589 when the old ruler was deposed and Mombasa became the headquarters for Portuguese rule in the northern sector, the Portuguese brought along their chief ally, the sheikh of

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DOOR BEHIND BOHRA MOSQUE, OLD PORT MOMBASA

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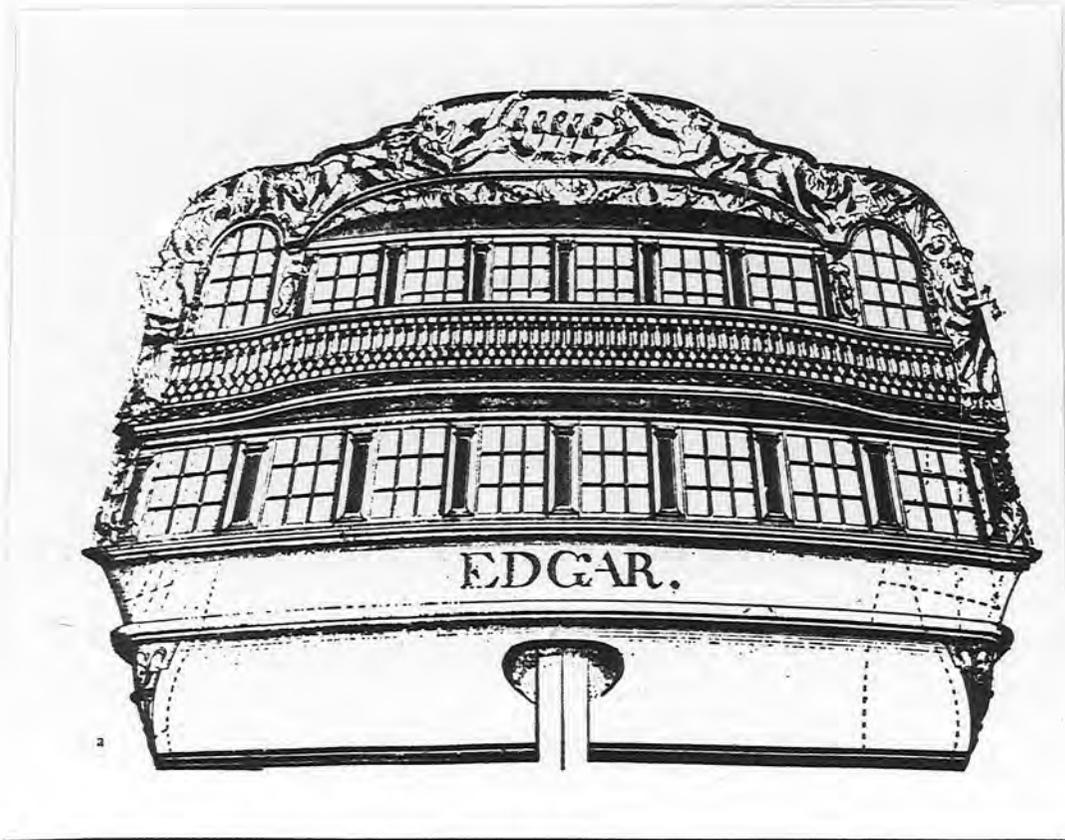
DOOR IN OLD MALINDI QUARTER, NOW MZIZIMA ROAD, MOMBASA

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Malindi, as titular ruler for the Swahili and the family made their home in Mombasa. The Malindi clan, therefore, considered themselves, so to speak, the royal family of the Swahili in Mombasa and claimed Shirazi descent. Under the Mazrui they continued to hold positions of power and the head of the family who could speak Portuguese was often employed as an ambassador and interpreter. At the beginning of the 19th century he was also made chief tamim, or representative of the Swahili, an important position that had formerly been held by a member of the Kilifi tribe. (48) Closely allied with the Mazrui by marriage, the family seems to have lost much of its prestige under Busaidi rule. Unfortunately, as no records survive, it cannot be ascertained whether this door once belonged to the head of the Malindi clan, but this seems likely.

These doors represent a localised version of the Busaidi rosette doors and are perhaps an attempt by the Mazrui and important families of Mombasa to emulate the styles favoured by the sultan of Zanzibar. Stylistically the doors seem to fall into the period c.1870 when Mombasa's economic position was improving and when such doors were beginning to have a popular appeal in East Africa. They relate more to the Lamu Mosque door dated 1876 [plate 25] than to the earlier dated doors and seem to be the work of an idiosyncratic carver who operated only in Mombasa.

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DRAWING OF THE DECORATION ON THE STERN OF A  
BRITISH NAVAL SHIP c. 1800. NOTE THE BALUSTRADING  
(Hansen)

The feature of the flasks across the lintel is most unusual and not seen elsewhere. It is possible that this motif represents marashi, or rosewater flasks, used in mosques, and to sprinkle guests, but another explanation is that it is an attempt to reproduce the balustrading commonly found on the sterns of ships, a design feature that had replaced the elaborate gingerbread work by the beginning of the 19th century.[plate 65] British naval ships visited the East African coast increasingly frequently so it is possible that the new design was noted and copied for the sterns of local baghlah and from there on to the doors of prominent shipowners. At some point in this process the balusters, however, had become marashis.

The other notable feature of these doors is the use of the carved rope which runs round the doors and across the door step with a dip in the centre. The rope as a decorative motif is not uncommon but is not usually seen carved along the door step, while the dip in the centre, which is emphasized as a circular loop on the Gazi main door, is most unusual.[plate 56] This could just be the trademark of the carver, who did in any case have a most distinctive and original style; or it could have a more explicit significance. Burton in his description of Zanzibar written in 1856, though not published until 1872, recalls seeing how ships cables were tied across the doors to prevent thieves from entering.(49) On these doors in Mombasa dating a few years later the rope has become a carved decoration, as with the availability of more sophisticated Indian iron and brass locking devices, ropes were no longer used for this purpose.

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It is also tempting to speculate that this group of doors represent the existence of an independence movement in Mombasa. It cannot be entirely coincidental that these Mombasa doors seem to have belonged to prominent families and groups with Mazrui links and that there were a series of rebellions in and around Mombasa during the 1870s when Busaidi rule was challenged and all but overthrown. (50)

#### DOOR CARVING IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Door carving as a contemporary art form seems to have died out c.1920. It is interesting that the 1920s saw the demise of many of the traditional skills and activities along this coastline. Dhows, doors and chests all ceased to be produced at about this time and became curios rather than a living art form. The jahazi, superseded the old mtepe and baghlah, and the abrupt decline in the dhow trade from this period seems to be the common factor.

Modern doors and chests are made from inferior wood and materials and are generally not made for the local market. A few rich Omanis still do commission doors and use chests in their houses, but most are made as tourist attractions. The designs have become stereotyped and tend to be pastiches or slavish imitations of designs developed in the 19th century. At the lower end of the market, aimed at tourists, small carved boxes and miniature doors are mass produced by the hundred. [plate 66]

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MINIATURE DOOR CARVED FOR THE TOURIST MARKET, ZANZIBAR

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FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER III

1. The main sources for this historical section are Nicholls (1971) and Sheikh al-Amin b. Ali al-Mazrui's manuscript history of the Mazrui dynasty in Mombasa, translated by James Ritchie. Also consulted are the Mombasa and Pate chronicles and various eyewitness accounts of the period which can be found in Freeman-Grenville (1962). Other sources include Kirkman (1987), and Allen's Lamu Guide.
  2. Mazrui, 16
  3. Strandes (1899), 238-57, gives a full account of the Portuguese recapture of Mombasa in 1728.
  4. Mazrui, 17, and Nicholls (1971), 48
  5. Mazrui, 18
  6. Mazrui, 21-3
  7. Mazrui, 27-9
  8. Nicholls (1971), 91
  9. Nicholls (1971), 122, says this occurred in 1810, and cites Smee's log entry for 18th February, 1811.
  10. Allen (1974)b, 6
  11. Freeman-Grenville (1973), 109
  12. Freeman-Grenville (1965), 41
  13. Nicholls (1971), 32
  14. Freeman-Grenville (1962), 203-5, James Prior's description of Kilwa
  15. Nicholls (1971), 26, 32, 49. See also Freeman Grenville, 194-5, the report by J. Crassons de Medeuil
  16. Kirkman (1987), 53
  17. Nicholls (1971), 99-100
  18. Nicholls (1971), 247-8
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19. Burton (1872), 259-60 Seyyid Said's two principal palaces in Zanzibar were Mtoni, built from 1828 and a palace in the centre of town called Bait al-Sahel, neither of which survive, but several lesser buildings from the palace compound of this town residence still exist.
  20. A.H. 1211. The inscription is not Quranic and has not yet been deciphered. Allen (1974)b, 26
  21. Kirkman (1983), 53
  22. Chittick (1974), 215 Richard Burton translated the inscription and date when he visited Kilwa.
  23. Strandes (1899), 57
  24. A.H. 1236 The inscription is not Quranic and reads 'To God belongs the utmost excellence. God the Compassionate the Merciful' Allen (1974)b, 27
  25. A.H. 1251 'There is no God but God' (37 v.35) 'Muhammad is the messenger of God' (48 v.29) 'May God bless him and grant him peace'. Allen (1974)b, 27
  26. This date is noted in English on a plaque beside the door
  27. A.H. 1286. Quran 28 v.1. Allen (1974)b, 27
  28. Read for me by Dr G.R. Smith
  29. Shelswell-White (1939), 53-4
  30. 27th Rajab 1293, i.e. 4th August 1876 Allen (1974)b, 27
  31. Strandes (1899), 63
  32. Freeman-Grenville, (1962), 131
  33. For information on Siu see Brown (1985)
  34. Information received during conversations with Mr J. de V. Allen.
  35. Dr Wilding informs me that this technique is called boasting and is found generally in masonry and pottery.
  36. For information on the mtepe and jahazi dhows, see Lydekker (1919) and Prins (1965)
  37. See p.39.
  38. Pouwels (1987), 130
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39. There are three inscriptions on each drum, which are identical on both. These read:
1. 'The Royalty of God. He is one having all things under his control'
  2. 'The possessor of favours has taken the kingship. Thou art noble because of thy nobility'
  3. 'Prudence is the beauty of thy actions, may thy deeds be well done'
- Translations supplied by J. de V. Allen
40. The Vumba drums are displayed in Fort Jesus Museum, Mombasa
41. Sullivan (1873), 102
42. Jewell (1969), 29
43. Shelswell-White (1939), 40
44. For information about Mbaruk of Gazi see Salim (1978), Chapter 1.
45. Translation of the inscription supplied by Sheikh Ahmed Nabhany
46. There is a plaque inside the entrance naming the founder as Harb b. Uthman al-Kilwy al-Shanganiny (al-Changamwiy) and stating that the mosque was built during the time of Liwali Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Uthman Mazrui's hajj to Mecca, which according to an inscription in the Mazrui Hall, Fort Jesus, took place in 1793.
47. Information from Muhammad Antar, long time resident of Old Town Mombasa, whose family nowadays rent the building.
48. Mazrui, 40
- 
49. Burton (1872), 86: 'A yard of ships cable drives away thieves'
50. The political situation in Mombasa during the 1870s is well described in Hinawy (1950), *passim*, when Busaidi control was only restored by sending a British man of war to bombard the fort in 1875.
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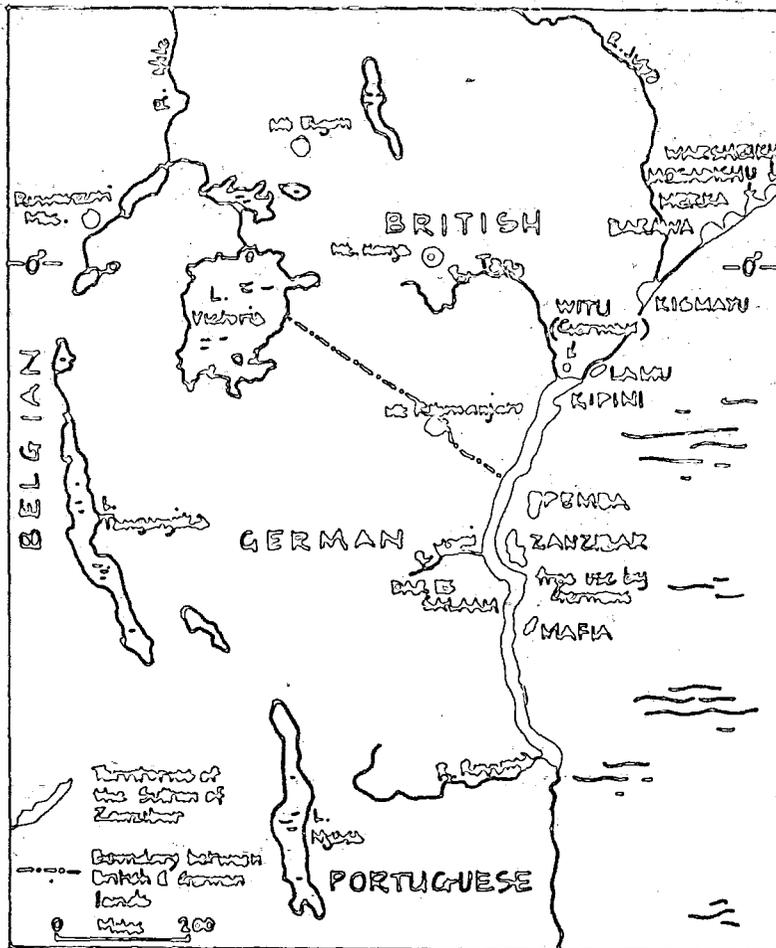
CHAPTER IV

*INDIA AND EAST AFRICA:  
THE LATER DOORS*

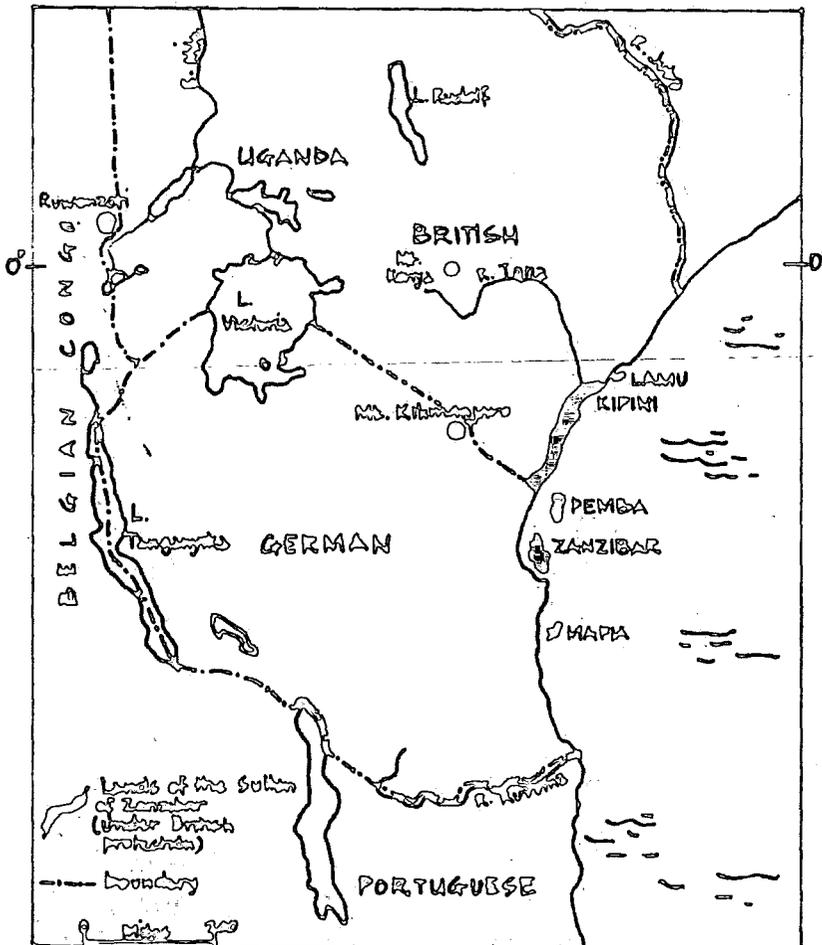
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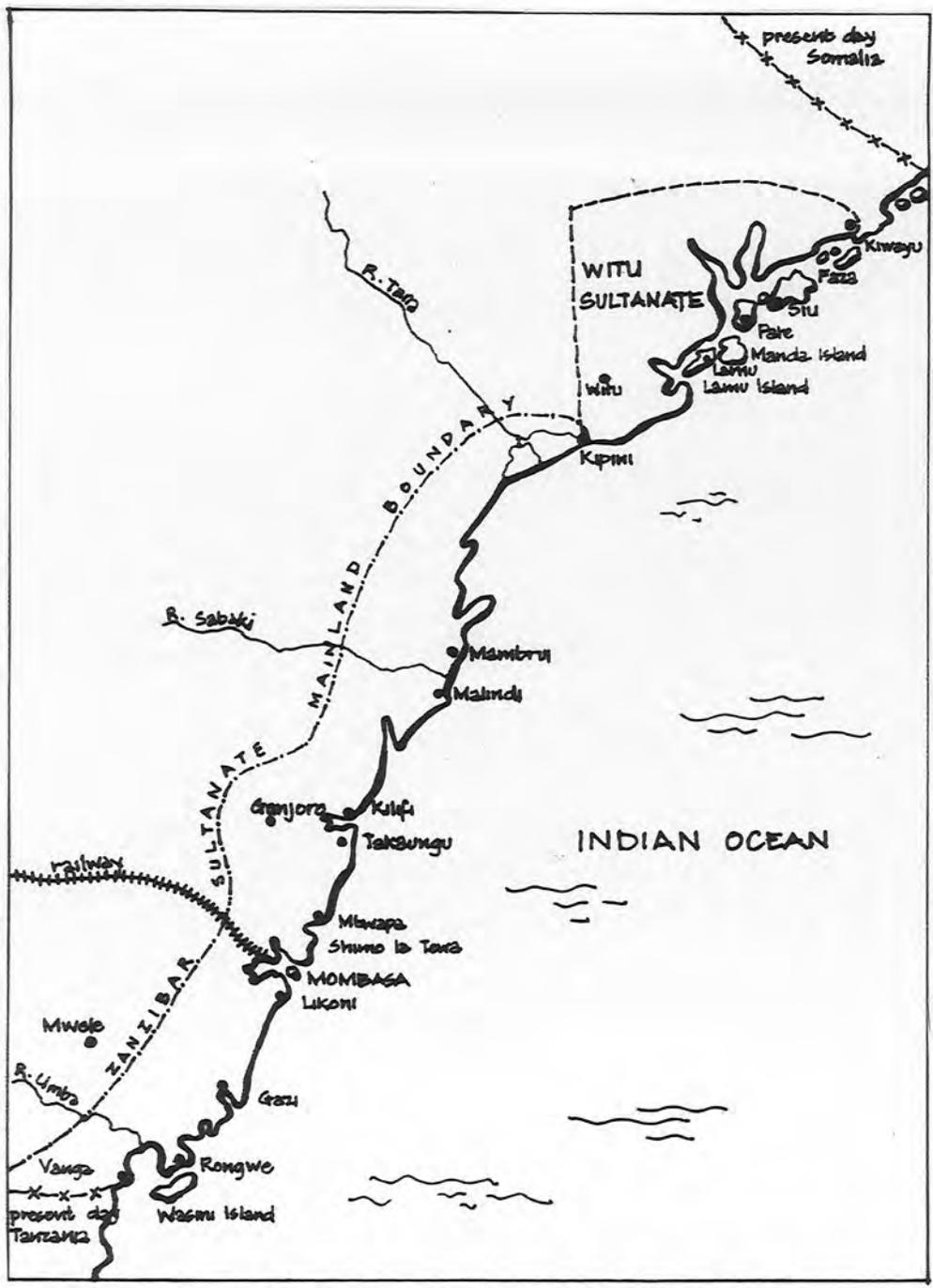
FIG.V



EAST AFRICA AFTER THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE BRITISH AND THE GERMANS IN 1895.



EAST AFRICA AFTER THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE BRITISH AND THE GERMANS IN 1900



THE COAST OF KENYA SHOWING MAIN TOWNS AND BOUNDARIES IN THE LATE 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

The later 19th century in East Africa was a period of growing prosperity and one of increasing international involvement. (1)

In 1856 on the death of Seyyid Said, a dispute broke out among his surviving sons over the partitioning of his dominions. The eldest son, Thuwein, ruled Muscat, another son, Turki, was in Sohar, and a third, Majid, claimed Zanzibar. Zanzibar and East Africa were formally separated from Oman in 1862 and in an arrangement known as Lord Canning's Award, Sultan Majid agreed to pay his elder brother, Thuwein, 40,000 crowns annually in compensation for his loss of revenue. Majid had great difficulty in raising this amount and quickly fell into arrears, as he had already bankrupted the royal treasury in building himself a new capital at Dar es-Salaam. In 1871 after his death, his younger brother, Bargash, who succeeded him, entered into an agreement with the British Colonial Government of India, whereby they settled the outstanding payments in return for preferential trading rights. In 1872 the British India Steam Navigation Company started a regular service between Bombay and Zanzibar and the laying of a cable by the Eastern Telegraph Company in 1879 between Aden and Zanzibar further enhanced Zanzibar as an international port of call on a main route to India. After 1873 a permanent solution to the embarrassing Muscat subsidy was reached, whereby the viceroy of India paid the money to the sultan of Muscat and Bargash entered into a treaty with Sir Bartle Frere to abolish slavery.

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The reign of Sultan Majid, 1856-70, was a period of transition for East Africa, when political and economic teething troubles held back the full tide of expansion. The accession of Bargash in 1870 and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 marks the start of a new phase of activity. The principal trading partner was British India and the increasing influence and settlement from India is apparent in the architecture and the door designs. Western tastes too begin to make an appearance.

By the 1880s the scramble for Africa had begun and the sultan in Zanzibar became a pawn in the game of the two super-powers of the time, Germany and Britain, who sought to extend their influence over a hitherto neglected part of the world. The sultan's dominions were carved up and handed out, so that by 1887 he had lost control of the entire coast of East Africa and retained only the Zanzibar islands and Lamu and these too fell under British protection by 1890.

Mombasa's importance grew after 1887 when it became the chief port in the northern section of the sultan's dominions of East Africa which formed the British concession. Dar es-Salaam, in the southern sector was the major German port. The majority of Mombasa doors date from this late period and many show strong Indian influence. There are many Indian peoples living in Mombasa Old Town, traders who came from Zanzibar in the 19th century and those who came with the British administrators from 1888. The great railway programme, which started in 1896 to connect Mombasa to Uganda, at that time thought to be the most promising part of the British sphere, involved an enormous

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workforce brought out from India, many of whom settled. Skilled engineers, masons and carpenters were among those who came over. Many of the large houses built at this time have a section of railway line as the main joist, while the cast iron balconies were shipped in sections along with the railway equipment. Quantities of teak wood came this way and even entire doors.

Mombasa never had the cultural pretensions of either Lamu or Zanzibar and the doors reflect a business-like approach where extremes in fashion are avoided. Owned by successful merchants, the doors signified their increasing confidence and prosperity. Mombasa as a town today has a generally later appearance than Zanzibar; the influence is predominantly colonial British/Indian overlaying the decayed Portuguese and Omani settlement.

#### GUJERATI DOORS

One of the few doors in Mombasa town to have a clear history is the door to the building which is now the Sanaa Gallery in Government Square, opposite the dhow harbour, but originally belonged to a Mr Alidina Visram, who lived from 1851-1916. He was a devout Ismaili business man, who came to Mombasa via Bagamoyo in 1898 and accumulated a large fortune by supplying the British with provisions and labour needed for the building of the Mombasa Railway. He was a generous as well as wealthy man, who founded and built mosques, schools and businesses in Kenya and Uganda. He first came to East Africa in 1863 as a boy of twelve on a sailing dhow from Cutch and worked in a Bagamoyo business which supplied provisions and porters for trading

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DIAGRAM OF A GUJERATI DOOR

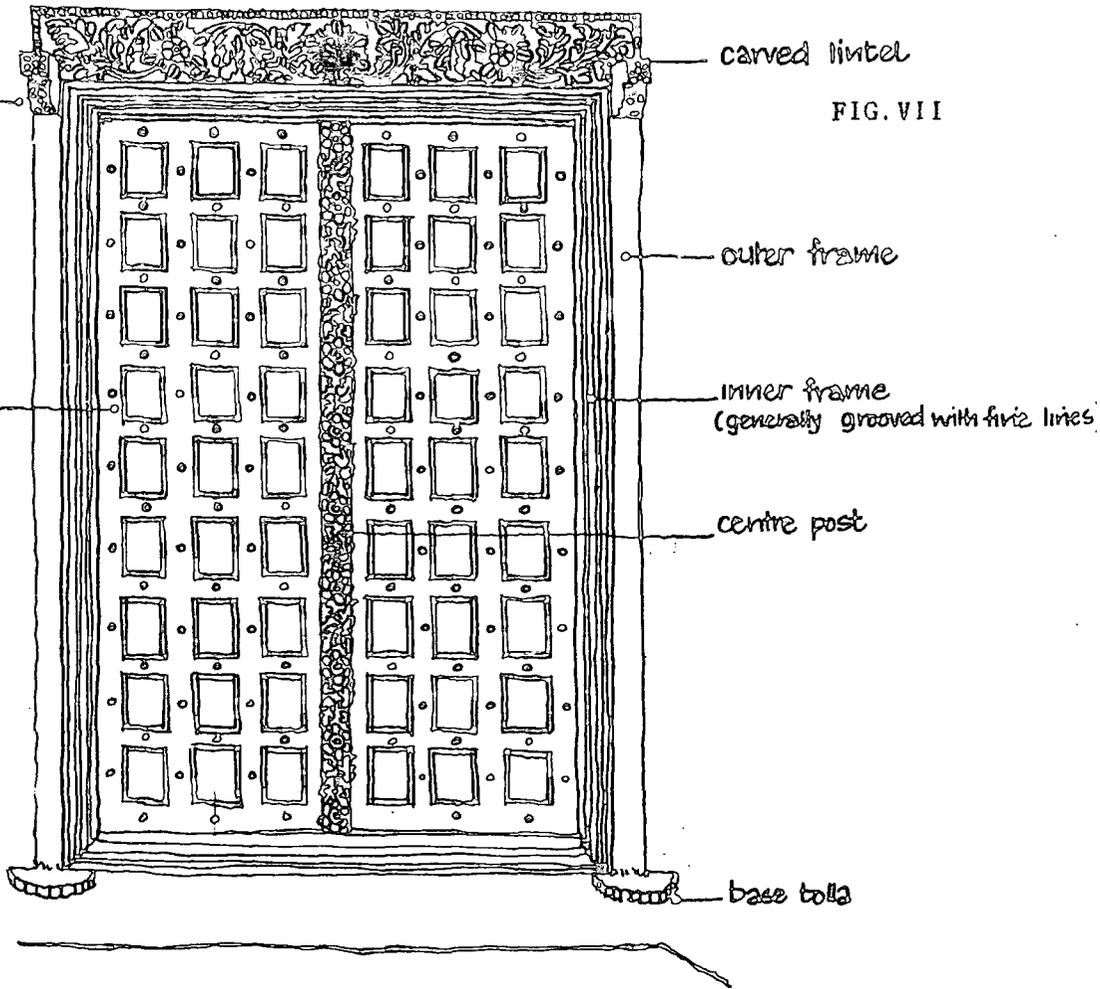
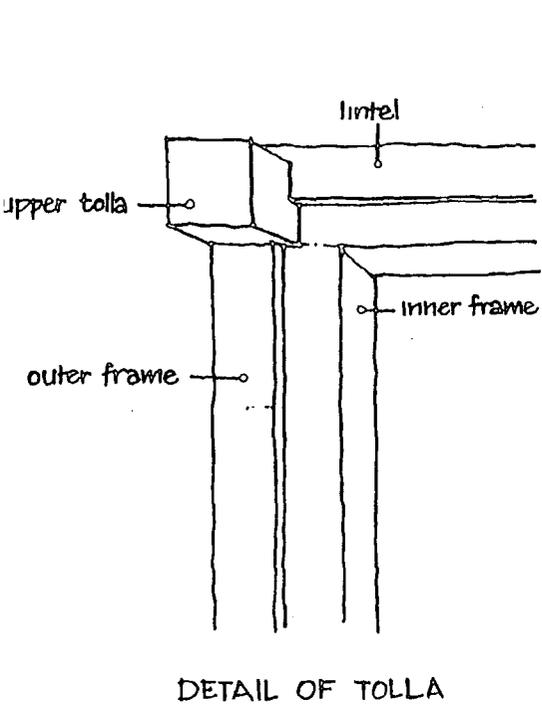
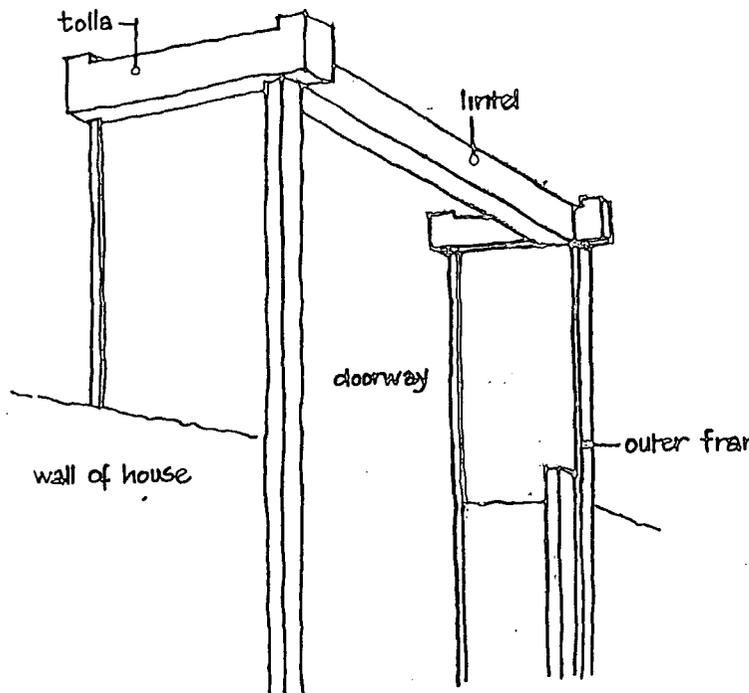


FIG. VII



DETAIL OF TOLLA



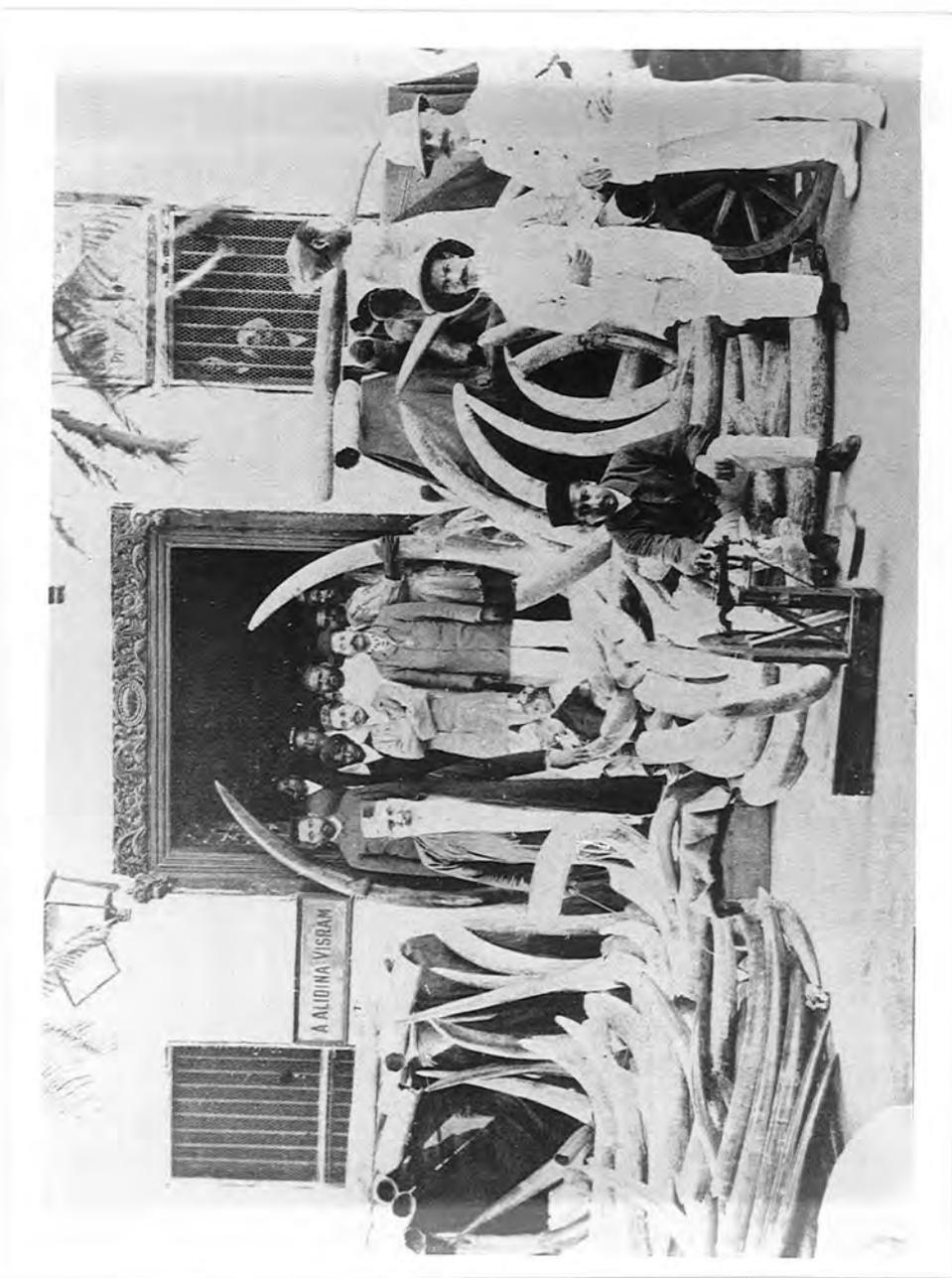
DETAIL SHOWING THE SIDE VIEW OF A GUJERATI DOOR USING THE TOLLA CONSTRUCTION

caravans and foreign ventures into the interior. He was one of the most wealthy and influential inhabitants of Mombasa by the turn of the 20th century. Plate 67 shows the door to his main office in the town situated directly opposite the main gates of the former port. (2)

The design on the lintel is made up of a flowing fleshy leaf design interspersed with rosettes and the narrow centrepost has the same design. The leaf and strawberry like fruit could possibly be an indianized version of the oak and acorn. The leaf certainly looks very much like that of an oak and English decorative themes were understandably popular in British colonial India. The central oval plaque is left bare, presumably for the inclusion of the owner's name or house number. The door panels are coffered and studded, and each door panel has a central hinge so that only a section of the door need be opened. Of particular interest are the carved protrusions on either side at the top and the round fluted base pieces at the foot of the door jambs, which in architectural terminology are called tolla. (3)[plate 68]

This door is made of teak by Indian craftsmen and the interlocking feature of the tolla, which connect an inner and outer door frame together, rather like a Chinese puzzle, are peculiar to door and window frames in Gujerat. There are many doors that follow this pattern in Mombasa. The owners were generally of Indian origin, Ismaili or Bohra merchants from Cutch and Mandvi. These doors date

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ALIDINA VISRAM WITH THE LONG WHITE BEARD, IN FRONT OF  
HIS OFFICES IN MOMBASA, c. 1908  
(Somerset-Playne)

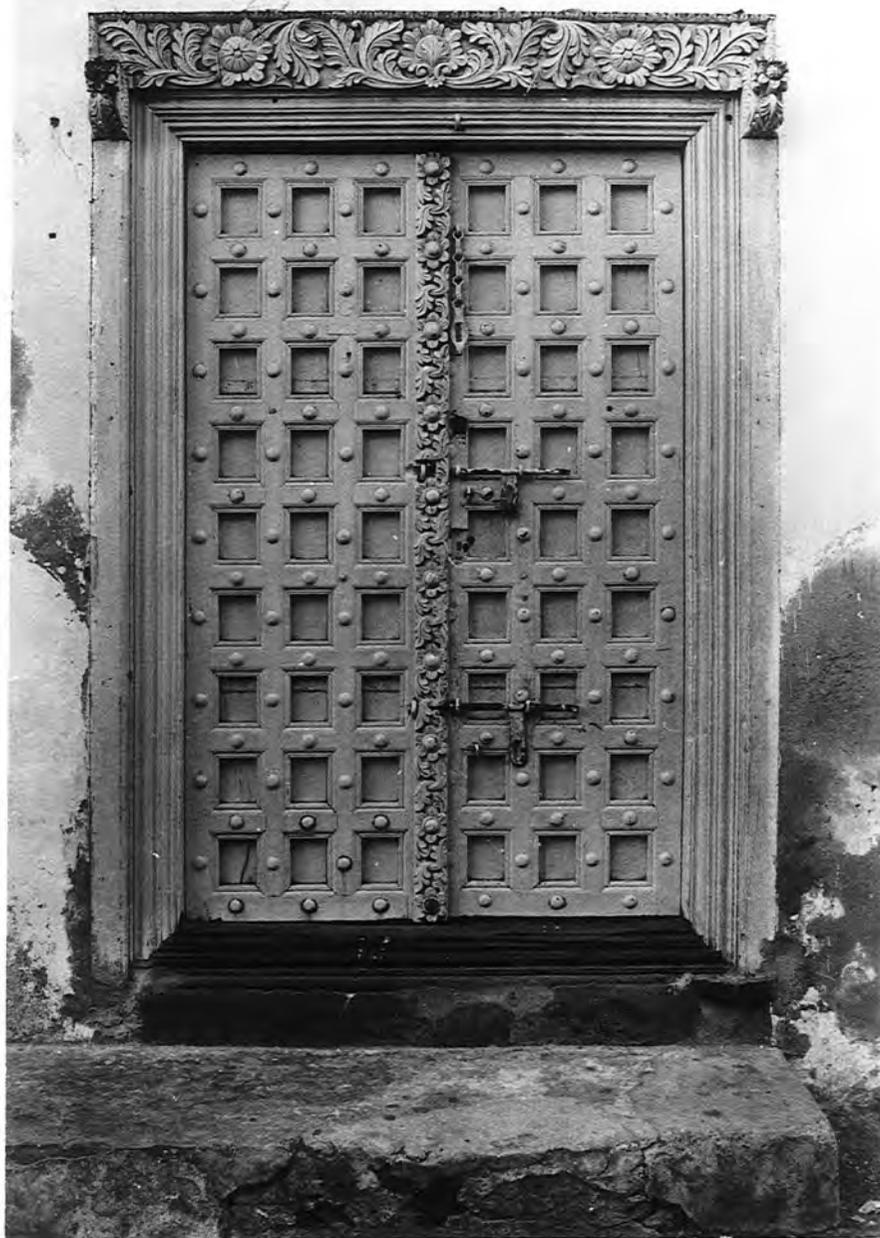


THE VISRAM DOOR STILL IN THE SAME BUILDING,  
PHOTOGRAPHED 1986

from the late 19th century and were probably shipped complete from India. In Zanzibar this kind of door is found particularly in Gizenga Street, the bazaar section of town.

Plates 69-71 show a series of doors which relate closely to the Visram door. Two of them certainly predate 1904, as they are mentioned in a street directory for Mombasa for that year, belonging to prominent merchants. (4) Some of these doors, though following the same basic construction, show a less elaborate design, only the centrepost is decorated and the coffering is much simplified. Plate 72 shows a door which belongs to the house of a Bohra family, who have lived there since about 1860. (5) The house is old and probably before that belonged to a Portuguese merchant, and may even have been the Portuguese customs house. According to tradition it is thought to have housed the British naval officers, Lt. Reitz and Midshipman Phillips, during their brief stay in Mombasa during the 1820s. The ground floor is used as a warehouse and there are two other doors of the more elaborate Gujerati style in the same building. Only a few of this simpler door type are seen in Zanzibar and in Lamu. Lamu in any case never had a large Indian population while in Zanzibar the doors are generally more elaborate. This probably indicates that it is an earlier variation, dating from a less affluent period in the merchant's life.

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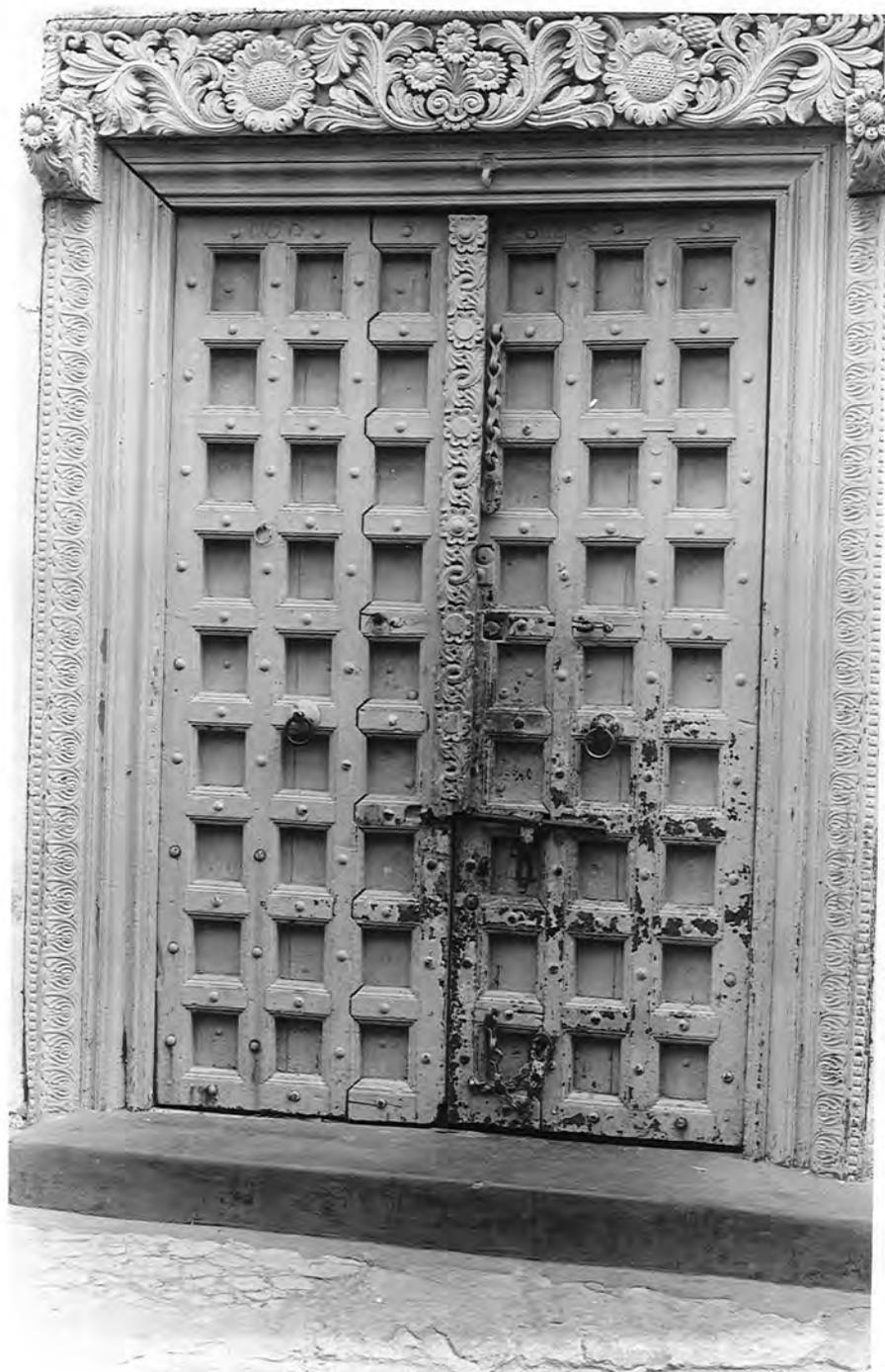
GUJERATI DOOR, MOMBASA: ABDUL AMIR, A GRAIN AND CLOTH  
MERCHANT, LIVED HERE IN 1904

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GUJERATI DOOR, MOMBASA: ABDUL HUSSEIN JIVANJEE LIVED  
HERE IN 1904

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FINE EXAMPLE OF A GUJERATI DOOR IN MOMBASA, SHOWING A  
SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT DESIGN



EARLIER STYLE OF GUJERATI DOOR, MOMBASA C. 1860

Bohra is a derivative of the Persian birahir meaning merchant, and they are one of the oldest Asian groups to have settled in Mombasa. They come mainly from the western seaboard of India, from Cutch and Mandvi. Perhaps the most famous Bohra merchant family was the Jivanjee family who went to Zanzibar in 1818 and became agents and bankers to Seyyid Said and controlled a vast business empire. (6) There are several fine old buildings in Mombasa, built by this family and, like Alidina Visram, the Jivanjee family did much to build up Mombasa as a modern trading centre. The first to arrive in Mombasa was Esmailji Jivanjee c.1880. The Bohra community remains today one of the wealthiest in East Africa and still owns much valuable land in Mombasa and the coast.

The interesting feature of the tolla was developed c.1750-1900, a period when the use of woodwork in Gujerati houses was particularly elaborate and profuse. (7) The tolla acts as a crosstie which connects an inner and outer door frame together. This double frame provides a structural support for the loose stone rubble from which the buildings were constructed. This kind of wooden strengthening was used in the windows as well. The doors and windows were much more durable than the masonry wall and there are several instances in Zanzibar where the buildings have fallen down but the doors still stand. (8) In Mombasa, where many old buildings are being demolished, the window and door frames are often re-used or sold at auction. Such strong door frames were not necessary in East Africa, where there was a plentiful supply of coral blocks, but it is interesting to see

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how many houses in Zanzibar and Mombasa favour the Indian method of building, probably because it was cheaper and quicker. The shutters of these doors were inset from another inner frame and were hung like all other doors on this coast, by means of a pivot at the top and bottom. The lower pivot was often made of iron and the earlier door panels did not have hinged sections.

#### INDIAN NEO-CLASSICAL DOORS

Another style of door frequently seen in Mombasa, also of Indian workmanship, are the round headed teak doors, with spokes as in a fanlight or cartwheel. Plate 73 shows a door belonging to the old house of Jadewji Dewji in the main street. (9) Sultan Bargash appointed Jadewji as his chief customs controller in Mombasa in 1870 and in 1882 Jadewji built this house which is still occupied by his descendants. He was from the Bhatia community, a Hindu caste from Cutch, another Indian group that had long connections with this coastline. His Mombasa business was established in 1884 and he was the largest rice dealer in town, importing rice from Rangoon and exporting ivory to Zanzibar. (10) Note the finely carved moulding or edging to this door.

Another family originating from Cutch, the Essaji family, who arrived between 1880-85, built a series of fine houses near Piggot Place with similar doors. (11) They are Bohra Muslims and the doors include Quranic inscriptions written in the door centre or right round the circular lintel. [plate 74] According to the present owners, descendants of the original family, these doors are made of teak and

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MR. DEWJI'S DOOR, MOMBASA c.1882



ESSAJI DOOR, MOMBASA c.1885

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were shipped from India. They were very common in India in colonial neo-classical architecture which was built throughout the country during the 19th century.

Another well known pioneer, Mr Esmailji Lookmanji built a large house in Mombasa about 1880. (12) His door in the main street shows a combination of styles, with a carved centrepost. [plate 75]

It is perhaps worth making the point here that the fashion for decorative doors certainly seems to be connected with Muslim owners. Mr Dewji's door is one of the very few exceptions, belonging to a Hindu family, and it is notably plain and unadorned.

#### LATE ZANZIBAR STYLE

There are unfortunately very few examples of the later Zanzibar style of door left in Mombasa. The finest one still remaining is on a waterside house, [plate 77] which once belonged to Mbarak Hinawy, liwali of Mombasa 1931-59, the sultan of Zanzibar's chief representative. The door, while of similar form to the previous group discussed, is much more decorative and the semicircular lintel is completely filled with intricate foliate carving. The fleshy leafed foliage and rosette designs are similar to those of the Gujerati doors, but without the special construction features. The carving style is reminiscent of Kashmiri decorative arts, the designs for which are said to have originated in the Gulf area and spread via Afghanistan to the Punjab as early as the 12th century. (13) As mentioned previously, it was the Moghul emperors who liked these

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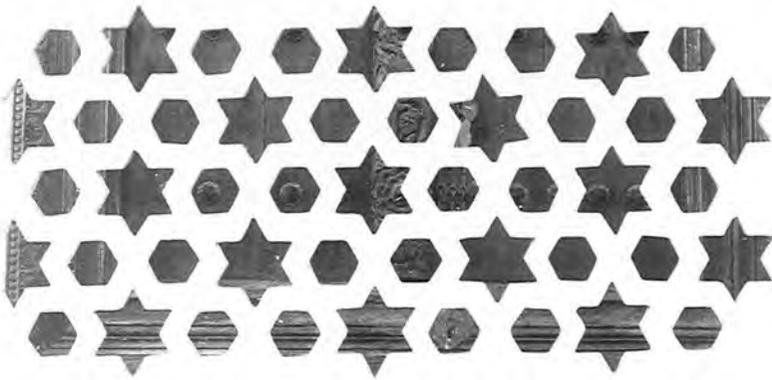


LOOKMANJI DOOR, MOMBASA



TYPICAL INDIAN NEO-CLASSICAL DOOR, WITH QURANIC  
INSCRIPTION, MOMBASA

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DOOR TO THE EX-LIWALI HOUSE, MOMBASA

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styles, which they considered properly Islamic and superior to the Hindu art of the ordinary people of India. This style, which has been called Indo-Persian or Moghul, continued to be fashionable in India, especially among the maharajahs, who ruled the princely states in the areas that had once been part of the Moghul empire.

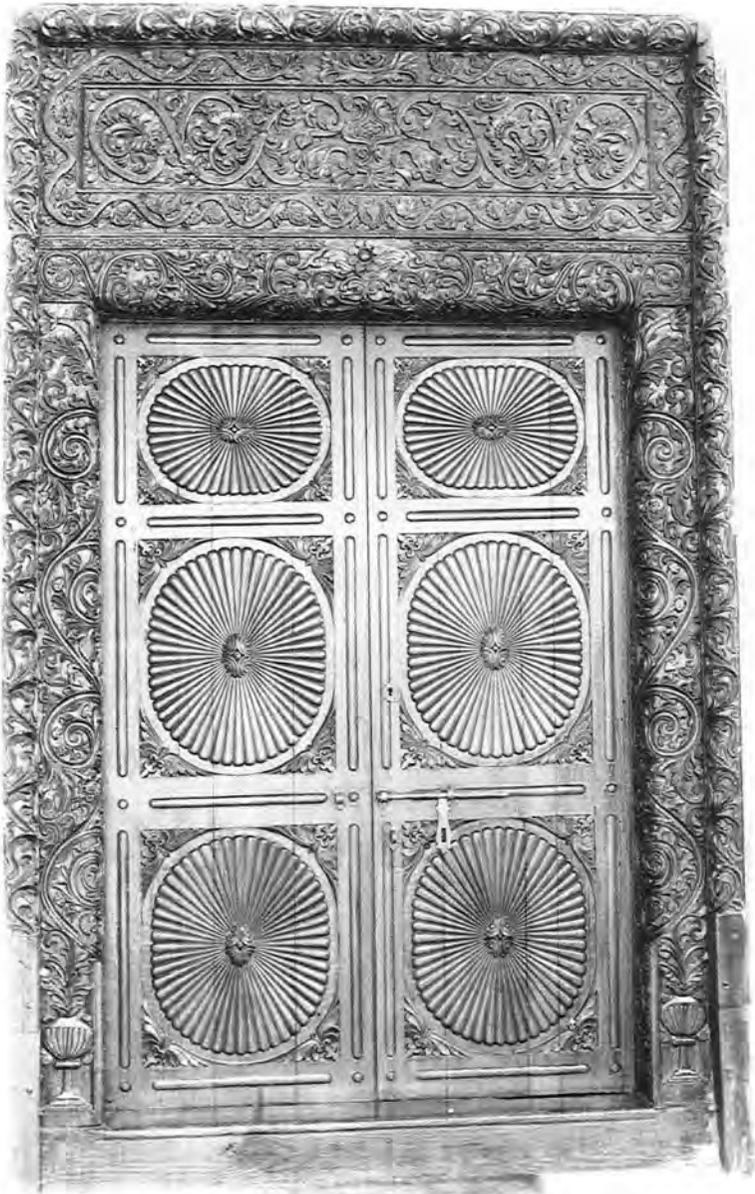
The liwali's house in Mombasa is said to have been built for Tharya Topan, a Khoja Ismaili, and yet another of the Zanzibar customs officials, who were able to make a name for themselves and amass large fortunes. From 1875-80 he was customs officer for the sultan and later was the leader of the Ismaili community in East Africa. The door probably dates from the late 1880s. By 1896 the house had been loaned as a philanthropic gesture to the Church Missionary Society and was used as the first medical clinic in Mombasa. Later it became the German Consulate until the First World War. (14) Another house which once had a fine door of the same style, was the so-called ladies house in Ndia Kuu, which was where the unmarried missionary ladies lived in the 1890s, but was owned by the enormously wealthy Jivanjee family, who were also susceptible to worthy causes. This door is sadly one that has disappeared from the town in recent years, but there are several old illustrations of it. (15)[plate 78] A fine example of the style in a square framed door dated 1913, (16) comes from the Dawoodi Bohra Mosque in Old Kilindini Road, Mombasa, by which time the style had become generally fashionable, and no longer reserved only for people of the highest standing.[plate 79]

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DOOR OF ESMAILJEE JIVANJEE and CO.'S OFFICES, NDIA KUU, MOMBASA.

TYPICAL EXAMPLE OF A LATE ZANZIBAR STYLE DOOR, MOMBASA  
(Macmillan)



BOHRA MOSQUE DOOR, 1913, MOMBASA

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These doors were first made popular by Sultan Bargash, who ruled Zanzibar from 1870-88. In 1859 after unsuccessfully trying to oust his elder brother, Majid, he was, with British intervention, exiled to Bombay. His stay in British India, where he saw the magnificent buildings and opulent life style of the wealthy, impressed him deeply and on his return after the death of his brother, he employed craftsmen from India to build and decorate his palaces in Zanzibar to a similar style. His most famous and influential building was the Bait al-Ajaib, House of Wonders, situated on the waterfront and completed in 1883. (17) Designed by a British marine engineer, with cast iron fluted pillars supporting the tiers of balconies, it was intended solely for ceremonial purposes. It contained rooms in western style filled with ornate furniture and elaborately carved doors inscribed in gilt with texts from the Quran. [plates 80-82] Exotic animals, given by visiting dignitaries, were displayed in cages outside the entrance, while military bands played in the courtyard. His taste for heavily ornate, intricate and massive woodcarving for doors and furniture set a fashion in East Africa that remained well into the 20th century, but it was one to which only the wealthiest could aspire. Nowadays the Bait al-Ajaib has been redecorated by experts from the People's Republic of Korea and is the Zanzibar Party Political College. It has been stripped of all its fine furnishings and houses photographs and relics showing the history of the Afro-Shirazi Party and the revolution. However the main structure remains unchanged and the thirteen carved doors are still there. There is a particularly fine door on the first floor leading into what was once

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MAIN ENTRANCE TO THE BAIT AL-AJAIB, ZANZIBAR  
COMPLETED, 1883



INTERIOR DOOR, SECOND FLOOR OF THE BAIT AL-AJAIB, ZANZIBAR  
SHOWING ORNAMENT AND QURANIC INSCRIPTIONS PICKED OUT IN GILT

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DETAIL SHOWING GILT LION AT THE FOOT OF THE DOOR LEADING TO  
THE FORMER SULTAN'S STATE APARTMENT, BAIT AL-AJAIB, ZANZIBAR

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the sultan's state apartments, with gilded lions at the foot of the door jambs and a marashi, rose water flask, in gilt at the apogee of the lintel arch. (18)

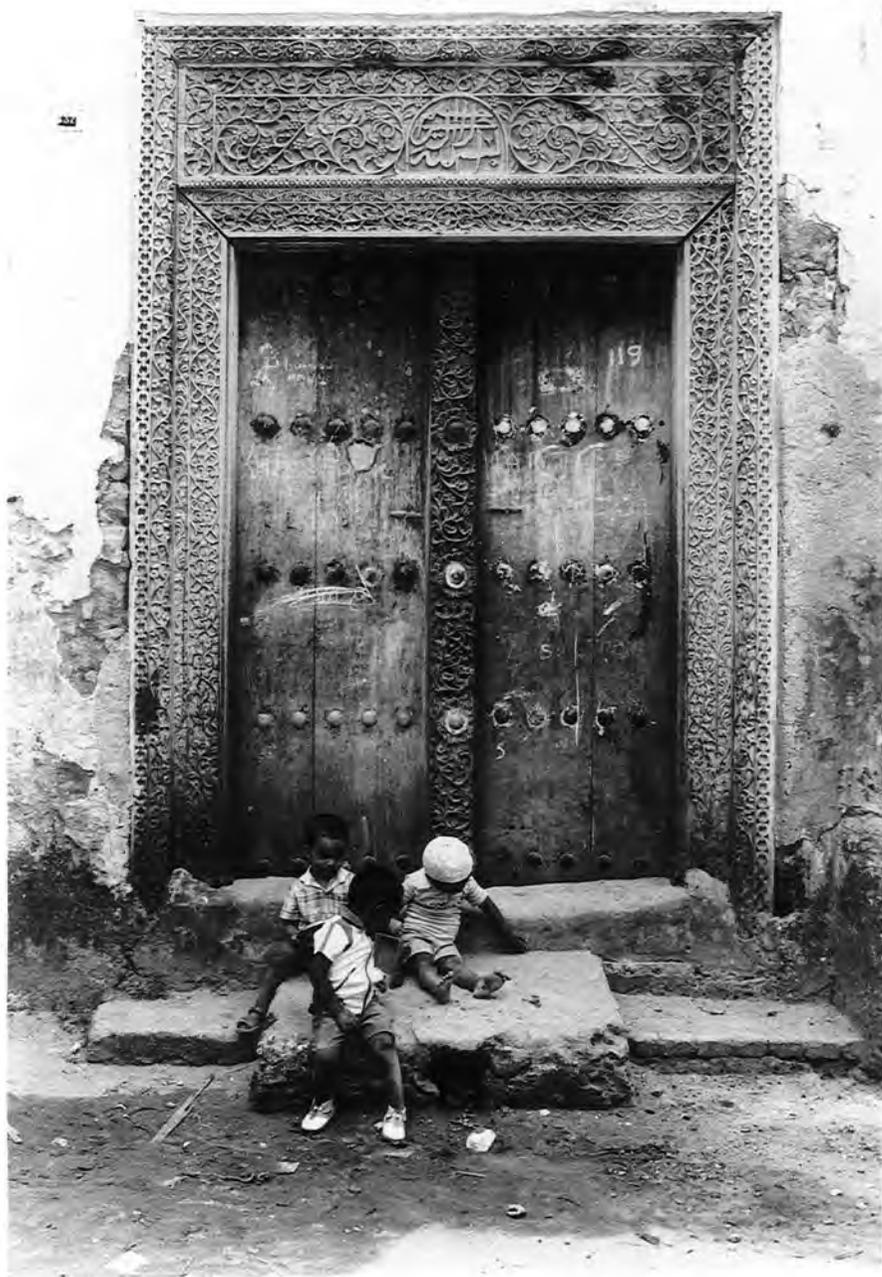
Many examples of this late Zanzibar style door are found in the Baghani and Shangani quarters of town, where the wealthy Arabs used to live in their palatial residences. Today most of these buildings are derelict, confiscated by the government and lived in by squatters. The doors are still there untouched. Often the semicircular lintel is carved with an open filigree work and the door frame sometimes takes on the appearance of classical pillars. The style is also found in square framed doors, frequently with a Quranic inscription and fine foliate designs running round the frame. These doors date from the last quarter of the 19th century and show an increasing dependence on European tastes. The carving of rounded forms required superior technology and were more difficult to execute successfully than square framed ones. The virtuosity of carving in some of these doors is quite remarkable. [see plates 83-86]

Though in Zanzibar virtually nothing of the fine old furnishings remain, in Mombasa certain of the wealthier families still retain family heirlooms. The interior, [plate 87], shows examples of the kind of furniture favoured by Sultan Bargash in the late 19th century in Zanzibar. The tables and chairs have been in the family for about a hundred years. (19)

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TYPICAL LATE ZANZIBAR DOOR. DATED 1891-2,  
TIPPU TIB HOUSE, ZANZIBAR



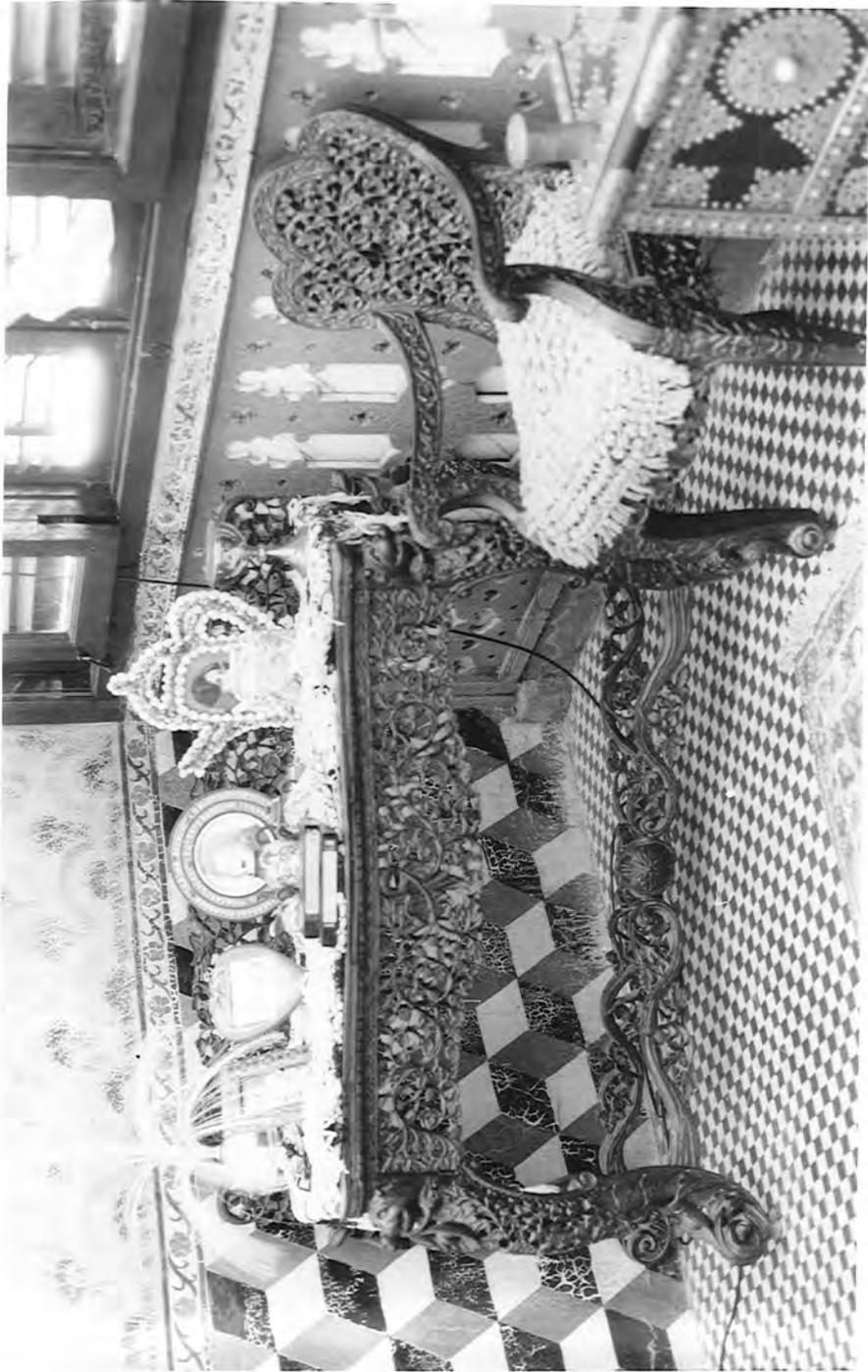
LATE 19TH CENTURY DOOR, ZANZIBAR. SQUARE STYLE



UNUSUAL LATE DOOR, ZANZIBAR: NOTICE THE INFLUENCE OF CLASSICAL AND WESTERN ART, ESPECIALLY IN THE USE OF PILLARS



20TH CENTURY CARVED DOOR, ZANZIBAR. FORMERLY OWNED  
BY THE HEAD OF THE ISMAILI COMMUNITY IN ZANZIBAR



INTERIOR, MOMBASA, SHOWING TYPICAL FURNISHINGS  
OF THE LATE ZANZIBAR PERIOD

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 FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER IV
 

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1. The major sources I have used for the historical information in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, are Eliot, Ingrams, Coupland, Salim and the Oxford History of East Africa Vol.I, which are listed in the Bibliography.
  2. Information taken from Somerset-Playne, (1909), 120, and research notes in the Friends of Fort Jesus collection.
  3. Tolla or todla seems to be an Indian term as it is not listed in the Penguin Dictionary of Architecture but appears in Trivedi and the anonymous article 'Structural woodwork in Gujerati Architecture'.
  4. Handbook of East Africa, Uganda and Zanzibar, (1904), 194, Mombasa Street directory.
  5. According to information received from elderly mother of present owner, Mr Alibhai. Handbook of East Africa, Uganda and Zanzibar (1904), 194, lists owner as Adamji, Alibhoy, merchant.
  6. Information about the Jivanjee family taken from research notes, Friends of Fort Jesus. See also Salvadori (1983), 183-4
  7. Information taken from unpublished article entitled 'Structural woodwork in Gujerati Architecture', archives of Mr J. de V. Allen
  8. Malisius (1985), 50, shows a plate of a collapsed house, where the door still stands.
  9. Handbook of East Africa, Uganda and Zanzibar, (1904), 194
  10. Somerset-Playne (1909), 103. Salvadori (1983), 89  
Another Dewji, Peera Dewji, served as head of Sultan Bargash's personal espionage network in Zanzibar. A former lamp cleaner, he was extremely clever, capable and unscrupulous and rose through stealth to become jack of all trades to Seyyid Bargash and Khalifa, but in 1889 was banished to Aden for his part in a plot to restore the sultan's dominions to strict Quranic law; he was also accused of complicity with the Germans. (Pouwels, 169-70).
  11. Information received from the Bssaji family who still live in Mombasa. Bssaji Gulamdar was the first to settle c.1880. See also Salvadori (1983), 183. In the 1904 directory they are listed as 'Gulam Hoosein and Co, merchant', *ibid* 194
  12. Jewell (1976), 29
  13. Brown, P. (1956), 6, 11, 22-5
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14. Salvadori (1983), 187, information about the house from Friends of Fort Jesus research notes.
  15. There is another illustration of this door showing C.M.S. missionaries, taken c.1896, Friends of Fort Jesus (1985), plate 4.
  16. Information given to the author by grandson of the founder.
  17. Shelswell-White (1939), 36
  18. It was customary to sprinkle guests at public occasions with rosewater which perhaps explains the presence of the marashi at the top of the door, see Allen (1977), 79
  19. From the beginning the Busaidi introduced western and Indian innovations. Burton relates that the Palace of Seyyid Said "boasted a few dingy chandeliers and three rows of common wooden bottomed chairs" (Burton (1872), 259-60, while Khalid, Seyyid Said's eldest son liked European clocks, Pouwels (1987), 127, but it was Bargash who went the furthest in popularising western and Indian taste in East Africa.
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CHAPTER V

*CRAFTSMEN, MYTHS, MOTIFS, SYMBOLS  
AND STYLISTIC CONCLUSIONS*

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DOOR CARVING AS A CRAFT

Carved doors are not like a modern day painting or sculpture where the artist chooses the subject matter, designs and executes it so that the finished result is entirely an expression of himself. Door carving is a craft, which is often done in a workshop and the owner of the workshop may well be purely a businessman, who employs craftsmen of varying skills, designers, woodcarvers, locksmiths, etc., who collectively produce a door to the specifications of a particular client.

To illustrate this point, a resumé of a conversation with Mr Muhammad Chandoo, who is the oldest man in Mombasa still actively involved in the door carving business, is given. (1) Mr. Chandoo is a Khoja Ithna-asheri originally from Bombay. His father came by dhow to Zanzibar in 1880 and he was born there in 1903. He started in business by buying up old doors and repairing them with his neighbour, a Sikh carpenter. He himself was originally trained in brass casting. He used to make locks, bolts and propellers, as well as fancy work for chests and doors. He related that in the 1920s there was only one door carving workshop belonging to a Mr Yahya, which still carved the old square style of door in Zanzibar. However, the majority of customers, especially Arabs and Indians, preferred the new rounded style and as a businessman he produced whatever was required. Nowadays the Chandoo workshop makes doors in the late Zanzibar style from mvule wood. When asked whom he thought originated the idea of carved doors, he replied that the original Shirazis were adept at

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CARPENTER AT WORK, ZANZIBAR

woodwork. They imported their skills from Persia, whereas the Moghuls brought the same styles to India and in his opinion the Taj Mahal has the finest examples of this artistic style in the world.

Today, the Chandooos, three generations, run a flourishing business and receive commissions from all over the world, from film-stars, oil sheikhs and prestigious hotels. Once suitable wood has been found (not an easy task as many species of hardwood are now protected) the design is discussed with the client. The Chandooos keep photographs and post-cards of old doors and chests so that the customer can choose which he prefers. Occasionally, as in the case of a recent client from Oman, a suitable Quranic inscription is included. The door pieces are cut and shaped. The design is drawn out on strips of tracing paper then transferred to the wood and carved. None of the Chandooos, grandfather, son nor grandson, do any of the drawing or carving and grandfather, Muhammad, is the only one to have any craft training. Instead they employ three or four carpenters and one trained in brass casting. The chief carpenter transfers the designs from the drawings which can be used many times. Recently an artist from Ethiopia visited the workshop and made some new designs for the carvers to copy. At present the workers are young men from Kisumu, Luos from the banks of Lake Victoria, who work with hand chisels and mallets in a room behind the office.

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THE FINAL TOUCHES: CHANDOO'S WORKSHOP IN MOMBASA  
THIS DOOR WAS MADE FOR A CLIENT IN OMAN

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MR CHANDOO'S WORKSHOP, MOMBASA: CARPENTERS AT WORK

Although in the 19th century there would have been no photographs, and no tracing paper and therefore the designs would have been copied by hand on to the wood, often from memory, it is not unreasonable to suppose that little change has occurred in the basic procedure. Certainly patterns were used again and again and only occasionally does originality or artistic licence creep in, and then often accidentally, where a pattern is misunderstood or simplified.

The question then arises to whom should one assign the art form of these doors? To those who actually did the physical work of carving? To those who formulated the designs? Or to those who chose to have the doors made and put in their houses and mosques? This is the classic craftsman/artist/patron triangle which comes into operation whenever an artefact involves more than one type of skill and is made under workshop conditions. In doorcarving, as in building, the carver tends to follow a pattern, just as the builder follows a plan. A craftsman is not responsible for the initial creative inspiration, which is supplied by the artist, where present, or the existence of a set design. The doors carved in East Africa are generally made to a set pattern based on designs and styles evolved elsewhere. However the interpretation by the carver is sometimes so far removed from the original, that the door can be said to be an artistic work in its own right which, when copied by other craftsmen, develops into a style of its own. The late 19th century in East Africa was a particularly dynamic period, when the favourable combination of readily available

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materials, skilled craftsmen, a repertoire of designs and wealthy patrons seeking outward displays of prestige stimulated artistic creativity.

#### WHO WERE THE MASTER CRAFTSMEN?

There has been much controversy recently over the extent of Indian and Arabic influence and participation in Swahili culture, particularly as there is a school of thought which thinks of Swahili culture as basically African and claims the material culture found on the Swahili coast is an indigenous development and the work of purely local craftsmen. One of the foremost exponents of this view, Allen, has this to say "By 1400 AD, if not before, however, Swahili culture was markedly different from anything known in Arabia and had distinctive features of its own. Thenceforth its development was autonomous, if spasmodic." (2) Later on in another article "As for 'Arab' doors in the sense of doors imported from Arabia or closely modelled on Arabian prototypes, there are none." (3) However more recent research increasingly shows that Swahili art forms are not isolated phenomena, but rather manifestations of a wider culture that is based not only on an Arabian/African meeting but, more importantly, on an Indian/Arabian meeting.

Donley-Reid has shown how the 18th and 19th century plasterwork decoration in Lamu houses, always thought to be peculiar to the Swahili, is also found on the Indian coast and was possibly the work of itinerant Indian craftsmen who came over in the dhows. (4) She

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also shows how the structure and spatial use of the houses in Lamu have resemblances to those of certain trading towns in north-west India, particularly in northern Gujerat and Saurashtra States. She claims that since, like high ranking Arabs, the upperclass Swahili men did not do skilled or unskilled labour and had slaves to do most tasks for them, they used skilled Indian craftsmen to do artistic work. (5) Arabs and Swahili considered Indians inferiors and consequently no mention of them appears in the annals of Swahili history, which is entirely taken up with matters of lineage and family feuds. Until recently this was taken to mean that, as nothing is written about it, there was no Indian presence on the African coast, and that the Indians, who certainly did come, came purely for trade and went back immediately. What is emerging, however, with more research centred on India, is that there was a steady influx of Indian craftsmen, which was well established by 1862, the year that the first emigration records are available from Cutch. (6) It is further suggested that this was not just a sudden development brought on by Seyyid Said's policies in Zanzibar, but part of a general practice that had been going on, in more modest proportions, for many years. It is thought that the craftsmen came with the traders for short periods, perhaps six months or even a year, and then returned, presumably the richer for their experience. It is even possible that traders were asked to bring out particular craftsmen for special jobs. According to Donley-Reid most of the master craftsmen were Hindu. (7) Indeed the Swahili word for carpenter, seramala or semala, has a Hindustani derivation, though the more general term, fundi, meaning craftsman has not. (8)

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Indian professional groups tended to keep their caste systems even after conversion to Islam and it is a Muslim group from Cutch that claims the longest connection with the East African coast. According to their community tradition it was a Badala pilot, Ahmed b. Majid, who showed Vasco da Gama the way from Malindi to India in 1498, while another Badala, a sea captain called Jusub Adam lived in Mombasa in 1705. (9) The Badala are a Cutchi Sunni group who are seafarers and boatbuilders and have a very old community living in Mombasa. The Luhar, an Indian caste of blacksmiths and carpenters also from Cutch, is another long established community living in Mombasa and is one of the few Indian groups that has intermarried with the Swahili. (10)

It has to be remembered that historically Arabs settled not only on the coast of Africa, but also on the whole of the coast of western India, with isolated settlements in Malaya and Indonesia as well. At these settlements entire communities lived off the pickings of the Arab trade. Like the Swahili towns, there were sailmakers, shipbuilders, moneylenders, ropeworkers and a hopeful colony of Muslims, whose womenfolk often married visiting Arab seamen and traders. This network of trading towns was used like service stations for the dhows and provided wearied travellers with rest and relaxation in familiar surroundings. Mosques often took the place of hotels and social centres where traders and seamen would meet and talk. The settlements were oases of Islamic culture in an otherwise foreign and often unfriendly land and this 'home from home' requirement was reflected in the architecture and decorative styles.

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Indian skills in carpentry and artistic work had a deservedly high reputation, but it was the Sharifs from Hadramawt who were the scholars and often the arbiters of taste and design on the coast of East Africa and it was their fellow countrymen, the Hadramis, who came to East Africa in ever increasing numbers during the 19th century as humble labourers and craftsmen. It is known that the embroidery of the bands (tiraz) attached to ceremonial robes (joha) and round the Muslim caps (kofia) was often carried out by Hadrami families, and the designs have similarities to those found on doors. Sheikh Abdallah Bakathir al-Kindi (1860-1925), who became one of the most renowned Islamic teachers and thinkers in East Africa, was from an impoverished Hadrami family living in Lamu. He spent his youth as an orphan who earned his living by embroidering kofia. (11) Muhammad Kijuma, a famous 19th century door carver of Lamu, was reputed to be a man of letters, and also came from a Hadrami family. His designs are still today carved in Lamu by carvers trained by his original pupils. His door in Lamu is signed and dated 1896/7 and includes a pair of caliper compasses. [see plate 91] (12) These compasses have curved legs to measure the diameter of a rounded object and must have been an innovation to the Kenya coast. The door is carved in the elaborate late Zanzibar style, it is square but has rounded door jambs and was presumably the entrance to his shop and school.

In Zanzibar there is a carpentry school, where door carving is taught by a descendent of Mr. Yahya who originated from the Comoro islands, but was again partially of Hadrami descent. (13) Comorians from the Comoro Islands, situated just off the coast of Africa north of

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LAMU DOOR DATED 1896/7. ON THE CENTREPOST A HAND POINTS TO  
A PAIR OF CALIPER COMPASSES AND THE SIGNATURE FUNDI KIJUMA

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Madagascar, came in large numbers to Zanzibar in the 19th century to settle, and were often sailors and skilled carpenters. They were generally better educated than their Swahili counterparts and enjoyed a reputation for religious learning although, like the Hadramis, were considered socially inferior to the elite Sharifs. The Comoro islands were settled in the 16th and 17th centuries by Islamic families mainly coming from the Hadramawt and at one point the ruler was a Sharif. (14)

The Baluchis are another group who can trace their connections with Mombasa certainly back to the 17th century and have a reputation for artistic work and were often itinerant craftsmen. They were also renowned as fierce soldiers and are employed by the sultans of Oman as soldiers to this day. It was in this capacity that most first came to Mombasa and East Africa. As a race they fall between the Persian and the north Indian and their infertile and desert country gave them every reason for seeking overseas employment of any kind. (15)

It is an interesting phenomenon of both carved doors and chests that the best craftsmen did not necessarily draw inspiration from a flourishing tradition at home. It is a vain exercise to search for fine carved doors in the Makran or Hadramawt and even the coastal regions of Cutch and Cambay have few doors compared with East Africa. (16) Whether this is because the tradition has now died out completely or because carved doors were originally intended only for the very highest ranking princes and sultans, cannot now be decided.

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Certainly in 19th century East Africa, where every man of wealth and prestige considered himself at least a prince, carved doors proliferated.

EVIDENCE OF SWAHILI CARPENTERS AND CRAFTSMEN WORKING IN MOMBASA

This idea that there were itinerant skilled craftsmen travelling with the dhows does not mean that there were no Swahili carpenters or that all doors were carved by foreigners, but rather that the most prestigious work was probably Indian or even imported. Muyaka, the Swahili poet who was writing c.1810-40 in Mombasa, wrote a poem entitled 'On those who boast for nothing', in which he complains about the poor workmanship of the local carpenters, Nyenye and Mwafaka, who despite their tools, saws, axes and planes, cannot do a good job and he bemoans the passing of good carpenters who have gone away.

'To eat meat on wooden plates, means that one has no porcelain  
The good carpenters are there no more, they've gone.  
Only the likes of Nynenye and Mwafaka remain,  
They may carry about axes, but are not able to straighten  
even a bent pole.' (17)

Emery in his description of Mombasa sent to the Royal Geographical Society in 1833 describes the Swahili living there as being a poor, but intelligent race of men, who were still clever masons and good mechanics. (18) Mechanic in this early 19th century context means artisan or craftsman.

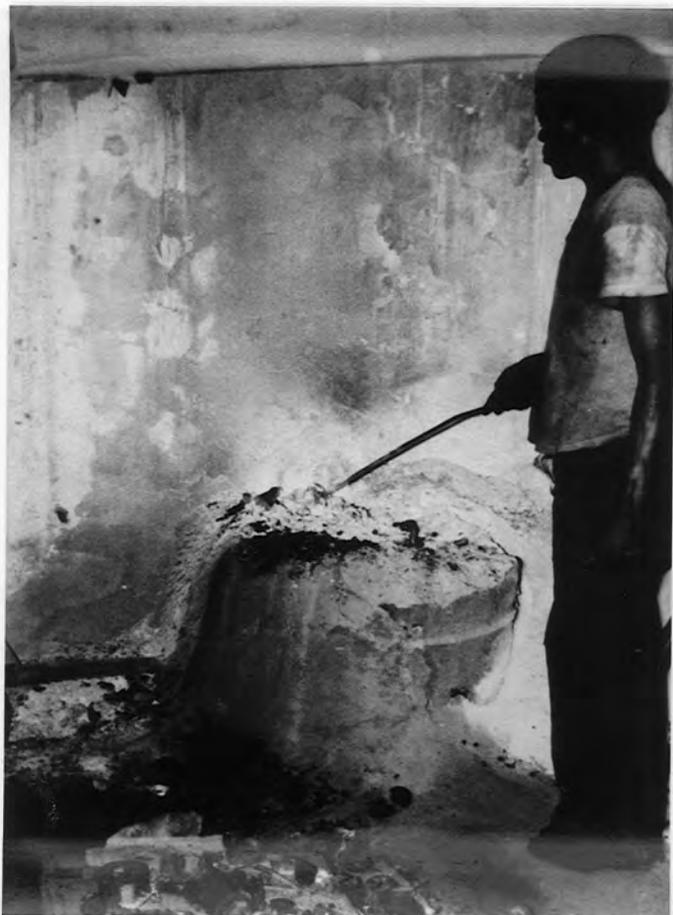
More information about craftsmen living and working in Mombasa comes from Charles New, who lived for nine years in Mombasa, 1863-72, as a missionary. He reported that 'the various kinds of handicraft occupy a large number of people. They are called fundi and are considered a

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superior class of men to farm labourers, porters and fishermen.' He mentions the seramala (carpenter) who makes huge doors, window frames, rude bedsteads, stools, etc., the muashi (mason) and the muhunzi (smith) and the fashion for weaving coloured borders from local coarse cloth called lemale, which were then attached to the imported cloth pieces. (19)

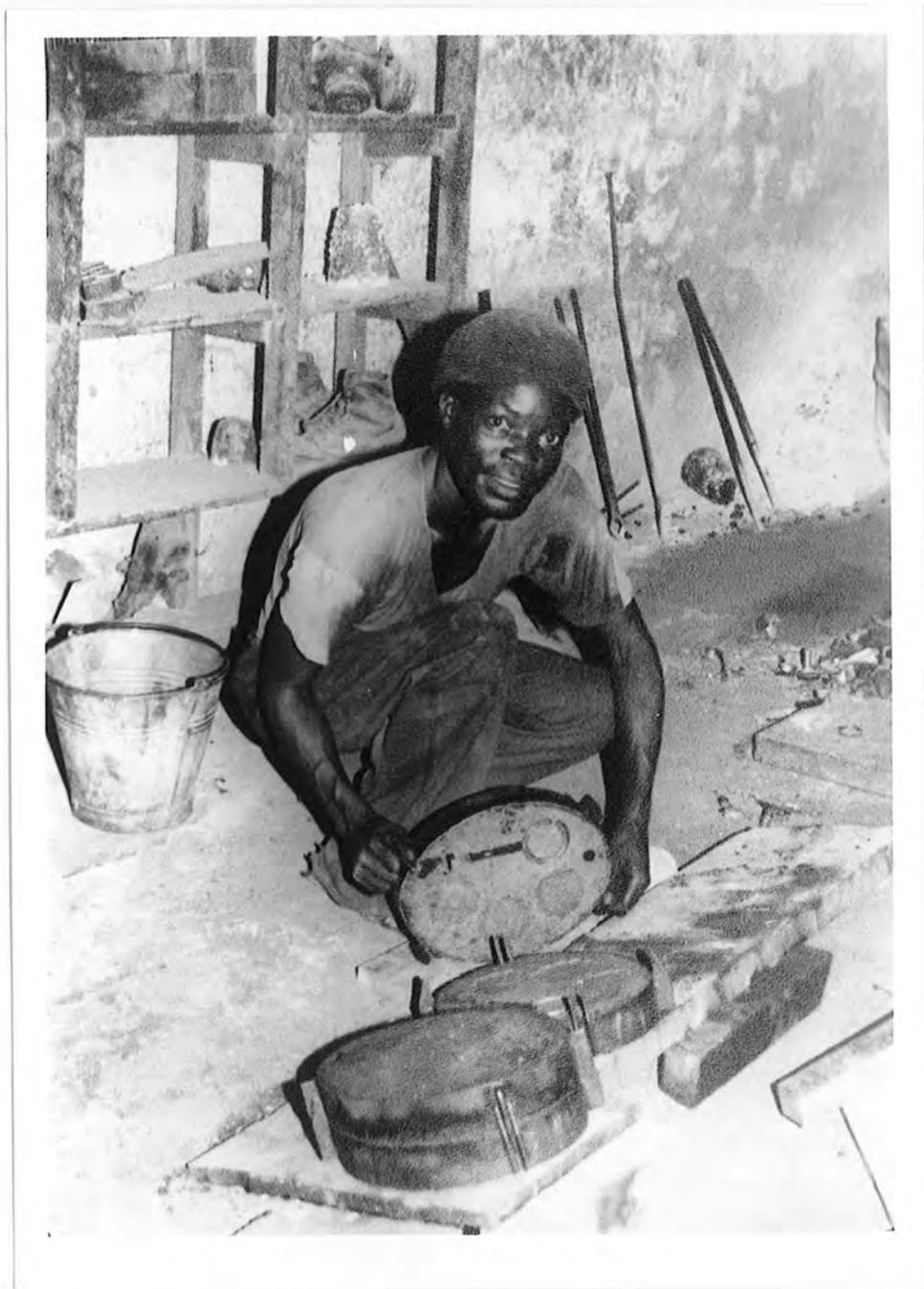
Abdulaziz claims that the ironsmiths, mfua chuma, were once an important group of Swahili craftsmen, put out of work by the Indian smiths, who worked in gold, silver and brass. (20) However the Luhar from Cutch, traditional workers in iron, are one of the oldest and most integrated Indian communities in Mombasa and may have always dominated the business, which is still a flourishing one today. Traditional East African craft, the mtepe, were sewn with coir, coconut rope, and nails were not used. The use of nailed planking was probably introduced by the Portuguese and brought to East Africa, where it was subsequently used on doors by Indian craftsmen, who had worked for the Portuguese, perhaps at Goa. The jahazi, which superseded the mtepe as the most commonly seen small coastal craft this century, is modelled on an Indian type and uses nails in its construction. It is difficult to assess the degree of Indian integration into East African society and their participation historically in these crafts, as it is not something that is generally admitted and no documentation exists.

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BRASS CASTING, MOMBASA

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BRASS CASTING, MOMBASA



BRASS CASTING, MOMBASA

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However it is clear that Swahili, Arabian and Indian craftsmen were all employed in the making and carving of doors, just as they were equally employed in repairing and building of dhows and innovations, brought from abroad into East Africa, quickly caught on with the Swahili. Door carving links closely with dhow building and where there was an economy based on timber and shipbuilding there were also craftsmen who could carve doors.

#### A NOTE ON THE COMMONLY USED WOODS FOR CARVED DOORS

It is more or less impossible to tell at a glance which wood was used for a particular door. Older doors are usually painted, treated with pitch or just so encrusted with dirt and grime or so eroded that the original colour and texture of the wood can no longer be seen. It would be an interesting experiment to examine scientifically a few of the dated doors to see if they are made of indigenous wood or not. The Kidichi door dated 1701 would make an especially interesting subject. We know that the more recent Indian doors are often made of teak which is not indigenous to Kenya but imported from India and Burma. Even to this day doors are carried in dhows, often as ballast, and can be assembled on arrival, and it is quite possible that several came to East Africa this way and were not made locally. However it is worth noting that the Swahili word for teak, saji, (from the Arabic saj) can just mean expensive wood and mvule wood, indigenous to Kenya, was often used as a substitute for teak.

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In amongst the correspondence with R.G. Cooley, early president of the Royal Geographical Society, is a letter from Lt. Emery dated 1833 which lists the types of woods he found near Mombasa and their uses. (21) Out of the eleven he mentions, six are used in shipbuilding, two for doors, two for bedsteads and one for rafters. The two trees listed for doors were mucongar-charlee, which had a height of 22' and 28" diameter and mechano, a much smaller tree growing to a height of 14' and 19" diameter. Mvule (spelt in his MS mowoulee) was, according to his list, the largest in use for shipbuilding.

These names do not correspond to timber in use today as, according to oral tradition, the most commonly used indigenous wood for old doors was mbamba kofi and mvule. Mvule (Chlorophora excelsa) is a hardwood formerly found on Pemba island, which is nowadays becoming increasingly scarce, while mbamba kofi (Afzalia quansensis) used to be commonly found in the forest areas of the coast. However local names can be very misleading as they probably refer to the same hardwood, which is called by a different name in different areas. Mucongar-charlee could well refer to wood brought out of the forest of Mkongani in the Shimba Hills, which lies directly behind Gazi, once a settlement of the Mazrui. The reef and island guarding the sheltered bay are known as Chale reef and Chale island respectively. Thus the wood brought out from this region became known as mkongani-chale, as we would spell it today. Similarly mbamba kofi possibly referred to the wood that was brought out at Kilifi from the Bamba forest. Interestingly, Takaungu, a sheltered outlet situated on the Kilifi

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creek, was also a haunt of the Mazrui, who took a keen interest in timber export and dhow building. There are still one or two examples of carved doors to be seen in Takaungu.

Another area rich in timber was situated not far from Kilwa and Gray relates an interesting tale of a British ship, H.M.S. Nisus, which called in for repairs and extra spars in 1812. (22) Mrima, as the area around Vanga was known, was another outlet for timber and trade where dhow repairs were carried out and coastal craft built on the secluded beaches.

Mechano, the other local wood listed by Emery as used particularly for doors, spelt in more usual form mchanno, could well refer to wood used for the making of channo, the circular trays which were always ornately carved and used for serving food. It seems that items were often called after the timber they were most often made from or vice-versa. Identification of wood types using local names is very confusing.

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Writing in the mid-19th century Burton mentions that mvule and a wood he calls mtimbati were used for the planks, crossbeams and door panels in Zanzibar. (23) Allen claims that a heavy type of mangrove of abnormally wide diameter called muia (Brughiera gymnorhiza) was used in the early Siu doors. (24) This wood being very durable was also very hard and consequently difficult to carve deeply. Mpingo (Dalbergia metanoxylon) or African ebony was the most highly prized wood of the area and was occasionally used for doors, though more

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commonly used for bedsteads and chairs, as it turned nicely on a lathe, but was again too hard for easy carving. Mgurule (Cambietum schumani), a tree similar to Bombay blackwood, that grew in the Witu forest, was popularly used as a substitute for ebony, mainly for furniture. Perhaps significantly these two blackwoods head Emery's wood list of 1833. There was a fashion for black wood in the early period and wooden doors and beams were coated in tar and pitch to give them a black appearance. The Portuguese also had a taste for black wood, and a number of small logs of African ebony were found in the cargo of a Mombasa wreck neatly marked with the owners' initials. (25) These were probably intended for making jewelry, as a substitute for the highly prized lignite jet.

Mkoko (Rhizophora mucronata) and mtu (Avicennia marina) are the most common species of mangrove, which were often used for the simpler doorposts in Lamu, where the original circular pole was simply split in half, carved and affixed to the door panel. It is not, however, particularly durable.

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Nowadays many of the indigenous coastal forests have almost disappeared and many species of tree have become scarce. Carpenters use woods imported from elsewhere or that would not have been available to the earlier craftsmen. Mahogany, muhuhu (Brachylaena hutchinsii), mainly from Uganda, is often used, mango (Magnifera indica) introduced from India, and jackfruit (Autocarpus heterophyllus), another Indian immigrant, though Xylocarpus, a rare indigenous species related to the jackfruit, may have once provided spars and masts for dhows.

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MYTHS AND MOTIFS

The vocabulary of motifs found on the earlier doors is particularly fascinating and problematical. Coastal people have fertile imaginations and perhaps they feel it discourteous not to give at least an attempt at an explanation for the various patterns and features when asked. Certainly in the author's experience no two people will give a similar interpretation. In recent years tourists have been interested to learn that the chain symbolises slavery, while the strange shape at the foot of the door jamb has been variously described as a pineapple or a fish and the iron spikes on the doors are there to hold off marauding elephants. One informant states that doors are painted blue to avert evil spirits and the chain denotes security not slavery. Hindus claim the rosette design is in fact the lotus flower of the goddess Laxmi, symbol of wealth, and iron on the threshold promotes good fortune, which is why locking devices appear there, a double check on fortune. Such is the divergence of opinion that one can only draw the conclusion that the designs were there before the later names and interpretations and that they have either been forgotten in antiquity or, as the designs were brought from elsewhere, they were never explained. One can see how the carpenter tended to link the shapes with more familiar objects. Thus a teacher in the Government wood carving school in Zanzibar has suggested that the vine element in the frame was a millipede, while the shape at the foot of the frame he called a small crocodile. In Lamu this last shape is called a cashew nut in the carving schools there. Depending on the interpretation of the carver, the shapes take on differing characteristics.

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The Swahili people are very superstitious and to this day have great faith in propitious omens and good luck charms, so that it is possible that some of the features and motifs did come to have special meanings. The Quranic passages inscribed so often above the doors conveyed a blessing on the house and the owner. The basmalah or opening words of each chapter of the Quran was often used. The door had an unusual amount of attention lavished on it. Various writers have commented on how an elaborate ceremony used to be performed when the door was put up at a new house site, and how the door was set up before the walls were built or the foundations laid. (26) This does not mean that the doors seen today were necessarily there before or at the time of building, as doors were often moved, put in different places and were not considered integral with the building. Indeed Gujerati doors were completely freestanding. Doors, like valuable pieces of furniture today, could be moved from house to house.

#### STATUS SYMBOLS, ETC

Carved doors were status symbols: they expressed the wealth and prestige of the owner. In the words of Sir Richard Burton writing in Zanzibar in the mid-19th century 'The higher the tenement, the bigger the gateway, the heavier the padlock and the huger the iron studs, which nail the door of heavy timber, the greater is the owner's dignity.' (27) This view was not confined to East Africa and by the beginning of the 20th century in the Punjab, according to Sir George Watt, 'Persons with any pretension to social position consider it essential to have a carved door.' (28)

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Carved doors were also prized possessions and in another instance Burton relates how doors were used as security during litigation. He describes how, when he called on the ruler in Harar, Ethiopia, in 1855, a highly unpleasant individual known as Sultan Ahmed b. Sultan Abubaker, he was surprised to see doors lying in the palace courtyard and was told that they had been confiscated. (29) It was no doubt a serious matter to have your door removed and put on view for all to see. Harar is a Moslem town and although it is not a port and does not lie on the coast, it does fall on one of the old Arab trading routes inland and was once a major trading centre. It is a walled stone city and has a carved door tradition. (30) This example serves as a reminder that carved doors were not restricted just to the coastal ports of the Indian Ocean, but were to be found wherever the traders settled.

A more amusing incident relating to the unusual use of a door, is that told by Ingrams in his description of the Busaidi conquest of Pemba in 1822-23. The local story goes that when the Mazrui tried to retake the island they had lost, Nasor b. Suleiman, the liwali appointed by the Busaidi sultan, on his way out to meet the attacking force sent by the Mazrui, collapsed, his courage failing him and he became unconscious. His followers took a door from a house and prepared to carry him back to the Busaidi held fort at Chake Chake, but as the liwali was a portly man, the door broke and they had to find another. In the meantime, reinforcements arrived from Chake Chake and he was carried finally into victorious action on a door. (31)

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Virtually nothing is ever said about doors in Swahili contemporary oral histories and literature and so this is particularly interesting, and, significantly, the door is clearly linked with the Busaidi liwali. No mention, surprisingly perhaps, is made of doors in the famous Swahili poem, *Al Inkishafi*, which describes the glories of Pate in its heyday and bemoans its declining fortunes, and was written c.1820. Carved beds and embroidered hangings on wooden rails are mentioned along with wall niches, ceramics and painted beams, but no doors. (32)

#### LINKS WITH CLASSICAL ART

Most of the motifs found on the doors have what is generally called a classical or Hellenistic origin. Besides the ever-present remains of the Græco-Roman empire to be found in North Africa and parts of Arabia, knowledge of this type of ornament was kept alive in the Byzantine empire with its capital at Constantinople. Constantinople finally fell to the Turks and came under Islamic rule in 1453 and many of its finest treasures were looted and dispersed, some ending up in the courts of Islamic rulers and others sold and brought to Europe.

The anthemion pattern and foliate scroll work, palmettes and rosettes all turn up in the classical ornamental repertoire. The bead and reel work often seen up the sides of East African doors derives from the classical astragal, while cable moulding or ropework was certainly not invented on the African coast, and is most often seen in Romanesque

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DETAIL OF A DOOR JAMB, SHOWING CHAINWORK, A TYPE OF BEAD AND REELWORK DESIGN, THE ROSETTE AND ANTHEMION ORNAMENT

art of the 11th and 12th centuries. Chainwork alone is less commonly seen in classical art and is usually thought of as an Indian motif. (33)

The object seen at the foot of the door frame, which has puzzled many people and been identified variously as a fish, or even a pineapple, seems, in its original state, to have been the vase or urn often connected with the 'tree of life' design. In the hands of successive carvers, who did not recognise it as such, it took on varying forms. The 'tree of life' is generally depicted as a tree with serpentine branches growing either out of a rockery or an urn bearing a profusion of mixed fruits, flowers and foliage, and has a long historical background. In more recent times it is found on Persian carpets and in Kashmiri decorative arts, and was also found on the painted cotton hangings that were exported to England from India from the beginning of the 17th century, mainly through Gujerati ports, and which became popularly known as chintzes, from the Indian chitta. (34) These Indian cottons were brightly coloured and the patterns permanently dyed so they did not fade or wash out. They had long been one of the staple trade items of East African commerce. It is perhaps worth remembering here that the first Shirazi sultan of Kilwa, according to the oral history of Kilwa, purchased the island with coloured cloth and thus earned the nickname 'nguo nyingi' (many clothes). (35)

Used as a border decoration, the 'tree of life' shows closer links with classical art. Interestingly Ghiberti's 15th century bronze doors to the Baptistry in Florence, one of the most famous early

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masterpieces of renaissance art in Italy, have decorated frames and the later one, completed in 1452, has vases on either side at the foot of the elaborate foliate border. (36) Another well known piece, the carved ivory throne in Ravenna, that was probably made in Constantinople as early as the sixth century, has vases with foliate tendrils growing from them supporting all kinds of vegetable and animal life, on all the uprights. (37) The prominence of the peacock perhaps suggests that at least one of the craftsmen who worked on this was Indian or Persian.

It is just possible that these items, made in more durable material than wood, give us a clue as to what the decorative woodwork admired by the Portuguese visitors to Kilwa and Mombasa looked like. Certainly late 15th century Portuguese taste would have leaned towards the classical and naturalistic, as it was a period when anything vaguely classical was extravagantly admired. It is doubtful that a geometric or abstract style of carving would have aroused much enthusiasm or admiration. It is possible that with adverse conditions, stricter Islamic rulings on representation in art and less overseas trade, this decorative style receded, literally, inside the houses and the forms were diluted and corrupted. With renewed contact with the Gulf and India, the ancient styles are revived, first indirectly by the early Busaidi rulers and their Hadrami and Baluchi craftsmen, and later on directly from India by the Bohra and Khoja merchants.

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FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER V

1. Information received from personal interviews with Mr Muhammad Chandoo and numerous visits to the Chandoo workshop 1986-87.
  2. Allen (1973)a, 2
  3. Allen (1974)c, 117
  4. Donley-Reid (1984), 104  
"The style of plaster and woodcarving as well as the turned lac furniture of the late 18th and early 19th century as seen in Lamu and Pate today, are similar to that which I have recorded in Kutch and Saurashtra of the same period". However N.B. plasterwork is also seen in parts of the Yemen and Persia.
  5. Donley-Reid (1984), 102
  6. Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, V, 1880, 103
  7. Donley-Reid, 219  
"Carved lotus flowers and mango leaves are common Hindu motifs also found on Muslim doors both in Gujerat and Kenya. The craftsmen who worked in stone and wood were for the most part Hindus both in India and Africa" She further suggests that the earlier carpenters came from Mandvi and Rander, small towns close to Surat and the later 19th century craftsmen came increasingly from Cutch, the inlet further north (ibid, 231)
  8. Madan (1903)
  9. Salvadori (1983), 140
  10. Salvadori (1983), 96 and 140
  11. Pouwels (1987), 155
  12. Allen, (1974)b, 27 Inscription reads "Carved in the month of Dhu al-Hijja in the year 1314. In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful" and it is signed Fundi Kijuma at the top of the centrepost.
  13. Visited by the author in 1987
  14. Searjeant (1957), 24
  15. Salvadori (1983), 138-9, 140
  16. Information received from Mrs Sheila Unwin, who has visited these places.
  17. Abdulaziz (1979), 311
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18. Emery (1833)
  19. New (1873), 63-4
  20. Abdulaziz (1979), 42
  21. Emery (1833)
  22. See Gray (1947) or Freeman-Grenville (1962), 202-212
  23. Burton (1872), 87
  24. Allen (1974)c, 116
  25. The Portuguese 42 gun frigate, the Santo Antonio de Tanna sank off Fort Jesus in 1697. Excavation of this wreck was carried out between 1977-82 and the finds can be seen at Fort Jesus Museum, Mombasa.
  26. Adie (1947), 114 and Donley-Reid (1985), 217
  27. Burton (1872), 86
  28. Watt (1903), 105-6
  29. Burton (1856), 205, "The door is a valuable and venerable article in this part of the world."
  30. Wilding (1976), 34
  31. Ingrams (1931), 157-8
  32. See the translation by Allen (1977), 53-73
  33. Most of these motifs are illustrated in The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture (1966)
  34. BBC Publications (1970), 17, and the chapter by John Irwin entitled 'Art as merchandise', 15-22
  35. Sutton (1966), 13, and Freeman-Grenville, 221
  36. See plate 13, Gombrich E.H. (1966)
  37. See plate 36, Vryonis (1967), 55
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The preceding chapters have shown that the designs for the carved doors of the Swahili coast can be traced back to the Gulf areas and north-west India. It is clear that the carved door artistic tradition did not originate on the coast of East Africa, though due to favourable conditions, it was an art form that flourished there exceedingly at the end of the 19th century. Furthermore it is likely that there had always been a tendency to decorate doors. Portuguese documentary evidence from the 15th century shows that doors even in that period were a noteworthy feature of the East African coastal towns. Decorative doors and entrances are found throughout the Islamic world, particularly in mosques and palaces, but it is only in East Africa that they achieve such prominence, as they are often the sole ornament of an otherwise austere architecture. Of all Islamic decorative arts, woodwork and door carving was the one most easily absorbed on the Swahili coast because there was a ready supply of timber and craftsmen familiar with working wood due to the dhow trade. Tile work, painting and stone carving did not proliferate on the East African coast because the raw materials and expertise were not readily available.

Of particular interest is the fact that the designs of the 19th century doors seem to have their roots in a continuing artistic tradition that is revived and does not break entirely from former styles. Many of the Indians who came to East Africa had themselves a similar background of material culture to the Swahilis, coming as they did from coastal ports, which had in turn long been associated with the ancient Arab trading network. Therefore the designs used on

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wooden doors and in the plaster decorative work inside Swahili houses can also be found on the north-west coast of India and traces of a continuing pattern element is evident in the carved coral ornament of the medieval settlements of the Swahili coast. The underlying thread that seems to run through Swahili decorative arts, tempts one to see 19th century door carving as a revival or renaissance of an earlier artistic flourishing brought about by renewed prosperity and renewed trading contacts with the Gulf and India. The late Zanzibar doors perhaps represent the full circle. It must be significant that the patterns in Moghul carving, on which the late Zanzibar doors are modelled are said to originate from Persia and to have travelled to the Punjab, via Afghanistan, in the 12th century. The Shirazi too are thought to have come from the Gulf regions, in those days a part of Persia, and it was their dynasties that were so successful during the golden age of the East African coastal trade settlements.

The development of the styles of door carving can be seen as a continuous cross fertilization of ideas and skills of many peoples. An interaction brought about by reason of trade and settlement, readily available timber and the skills necessary in shipbuilding. The 19th century Swahili doors represent the final flourishing and concluding chapter of an Islamic trade based culture and way of life that had existed for centuries.

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- akida: military commander in charge of the garrison of soldiers posted at each centre of administration to keep the peace and enforce the rule of government. During Busaidi rule he was appointed directly by the sultan in Zanzibar and acted like a latter day chief of police.
- Bajuni: maritime people from the Lamu archipelago and nearby coast, who consider themselves a branch of the Swahili, and are thought to have migrated from Somalia in the 17th century. They were often sailors and fishermen, who traded in mangrove poles and cowries.
- Badala: Cutchi Sunni group, who are seafarers and boatbuilders. They are the Asian community who claim the oldest connection with the East African coast. It is said that Ahmed b. Majid, known also as Cunha, was a Badala pilot and showed Vasco da Gama the way from India to Malindi in 1498. A Badala sea captain called Jusub Adam was reported as living in Mombasa in 1705.
- baghlah: largest of all ocean going dhows, which used to be built particularly in Sur and also on the East African coast. It was already a rarity in the 1930s; the word means 'mule' in Arabic.
- Baluchi: orthodox Sunni community following the Hanafi school. They came to East Africa mainly as mercenaries in the employ of the Sultans of Oman and Zanzibar. Traditionally Omani rulers recruited troops from Baluchistan and kept these troops under the command of jemadars, Baluchi commanders, as personal bodyguards as they could rely more on their loyalty. Baluchistan is situated in what is now north-west Pakistan, but was originally a part of Persia.
- banaa: dressed hardwood beam used for ceilings in mosques and traditional Swahili houses, usually painted with a red dye composed of pomegranate juice, mangrove stain and various other ingredients, and then with neat lines of black and white at the corners.
- Banyan: Hindu caste of moneylender, but in early descriptions of the East African coast the term is used more generally to mean a Hindu merchant or shopkeeper, from which the Swahili word bania, meaning shopkeeper was derived.
- baraza: place of public audience or reception, which can also mean public audience or council. It is also the name given to a stone bench attached to a house or mosque.
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- Bhatia:** Hindu community with long connections with Mombasa, who operated mainly as moneylenders and financiers and came from Mandvi and Bombay. In the 18th century they were reputed to be pirates. It appears that many of the so-called Banyans in Mazrui Mombasa were in fact Bhatias.
- Bohra:** derivation of a Persian word meaning trader, which is the name of an Indian Shia Muslim group from Gujerat. They are Ismailis who recognised Must'ali instead of Nizar as imam in 1094, and furthermore when there was another disputed imam in 1130, recognised al-Tayyib as their twenty-first imam. This imam disappeared in 1132 and the faithful, known as Tayyibi, are still awaiting his reappearance. The Tayyibi flourished particularly in the Yemen and from there travelled to the Gujerat in the 12th century, where they formed their own group with a separate dai or spiritual leader in the 16th century. This group call themselves the Dawoodi Tayyibi Ismaili Shi'a community, to differentiate themselves from the Tayyibis of Yemen, who were called Suleymanis. In East Africa they are simply known as Bohras and were among the first Asians to settle permanently in East Africa and open up trading businesses and had always had trading interests on the coast.
- boriti:** mangrove pole used as structural timber.
- coir:** rope made from coconut fibre, coconut fibre.
- daka:** enclosed entrance porch of a traditional Lamu stone house, opening onto the street and lined with stone benches.
- fundi:** craftsman.
- ghanjah:** type of small Arabian dhow built at Muscat.
- hajj:** the pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the pillars of Islam.
- Ibadi:** strict Kharijite community from Oman, with more ascetic views than the Shafi'i teachings to which most Swahilis adhere. Several of the older settlers from Oman changed to the Shafi'i school in the 19th century. It was Sheikh Ali Abdallah Nafi al-Mazrui, qadi in Mombasa during the reign of Sultan Majid, 1856-70, who encouraged this change and later in his writings disputed Ibadi doctrines. He was not popular with Sultan Bargash, who imprisoned him in 1887.
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- Ismaili:** a Shi'ite group who recognise Ismail as their 7th imam. Khoja Nizari Imami Ismailis recognise the Aga Khan as their spiritual leader. The Aga Khan claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad and thence from a Persian king called Nizar, whose claim as imam was disputed in 1094. Nizari followers went into obscurity during the succeeding centuries but revived enough to suffer persecution from the Shah of Persia in the 19th century. The Aga Khan and many of his adherents fled to India in 1840 and regrouped in north-west India where there was already an established community of Nizari followers who were known as Khojas derived from the Persian kwaja, meaning gentleman. The Khoja Ismailis were one of the most active groups to settle first in Zanzibar and then elsewhere in East Africa. They were in general a particularly energetic and capable community who flourished as businessmen.
- Ithnasheri:** a Shi'ite group who developed from the majority faction, which in 765 chose to follow Musa al-Kazim as the 7th imam, rather than Ismail. They are known as Ithnasheris (twelvers) because they follow a line of twelve successive imams. Most Kenyan Ithnasheris are Khojas, who split from the Khoja Ismailis in the late 19th century, and thus are rather different from the Ithnasheris usually associated with Iran. This is the brand of Islam, however, that is usually associated with Persia and what was referred to as 'the sect of the Persians' by the early writers.
- jahazi:** small coastal dhow built in Lamu.
- joho:** dark outer robe decorated along the edges with gold, red or black braid and worn over the kanzu, long white undershirt, by Arabs and high ranking Swahili in public. The fashion was imported from Oman.
- kaskazi:** north-east monsoon which blows from November to February and blows the dhows from Arabia and India to East Africa.
- kofia:** embroidered cap worn by Muslim men.
- kotia:** type of dhow built at Cutch, very similar to the ghanjah from Arabia.
- kusi:** south-west monsoon which blows from April to October and takes the dhows back to Arabia and India.
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- liwali: vice-regent, the sultan of Zanzibar's chief administrative representative, appointed at all the important towns along the coastal strip, which came under Busaidi rule. During the Busaidi period the liwali acted more or less as an independent ruler of the area to which he was appointed and tended to be drawn from the existing ruling family wherever possible. Exceptions to this were found at Lamu, where the liwali traditionally came from the Busaidi family and at Mombasa, where the liwali was a political appointee close to the sultan.
- Luhar: Indian caste of blacksmiths and carpenters from Cutch, who have a long association with Mombasa. They can be either Hindu, or Sunni Muslims, and in the latter case are known as Luhar Wadha.
- makuti: roofing like thatch, made from coconut palm leaves.
- marashi: sprinklers made from silver or glass, used for sprinkling rose water on guests, especially at public occasions, e.g. weddings.
- mihrab: apse like projection in a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca, the qibla. (q.v.)
- minbar: place in a mosque from which the Friday khutbah (or sermon) is delivered; usually situated next to the mihrab. (q.v.)
- mtepe: old fashioned coastal craft sewn together with coconut fibre, coir(q.v.), with a coconut matting sail. Traditional craft of the Bajuni(q.v.) used for transporting mangrove poles.
- Nyika:  
wa-nyika: name given to the African tribes living in the savannah round Mombasa. There were nine tribes of the Nyika, the Duruma, Rabai, Digo, Giriama, Jibana, Kambe, Kaume, Ribe and Chonyi. The Swahili as urban dwellers and traders relied on the Nyika for a market and for access to the interior as well as for support during factional warfare. There was considerable intermarriage between Nyikas and Swahilis and the relationship was cemented by special alliances. nowadays this term is no longer in use and the people are called the Mijikenda and have become largely Muslim and coastal dwellers.
- qadi: chief judge, responsible for enforcing the Sharia(q.v.) or Islamic legal system. This was a very influential position in the community.
- qibla: the direction of prayer in Islam. (q.v. mihrab)
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- seyyid: descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, a title of respect. The Busaidi sultans used this title.
- Shafi'i: one of the four recognised schools of law in Sunni Islam, founded by Imam Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi'i, 767-854. It is the teaching most widely recognised by the Swahili and was probably introduced to East Africa by the sharifs from the Hadramawt.
- shamba: cultivated land
- sharia: Islamic law, based on the Quran, the Hadith, etc.
- sharif: high born, noble, person who claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad through the paternal blood line. In some cases a distinction is made between a sharif, a descendent of Hasan and a seyyid, a descendent of Husain, both sons of Ali b. Abi Talib.
- sheikh: title of respect. In Swahili tribes the office of sheikh came below that of tamim. (q.v.) Sheikhs were elders or leaders of the families and clans within the Swahili groups. It is also a title given to a head of a family group among Arabs.
- Shia Muslims: are followers of Ali, whom they believe was appointed by the Prophet as his successor. They believe that divine guidance, not man, is responsible for the choice of their imam or spiritual leader, who is thus infallible and a superior being. They are divided into numerous sects reflecting disputes over succession.
- Sunni Muslims: from sunna, path, way, tradition. They accept the first four caliphs of the Prophet, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. They believe the Prophet's religious authority ended with his death and until the 13th century elected a caliph as their chief religious leader.
- tamim: spokesman. One tamim was elected from each of the two Swahili tribal confederations in Mombasa, the thelatha taifa and tisa taifa. (q.v.) A tamim liaised between the sultan and the moiety he represented and in the Busaidi period was paid a salary and given a letter of appointment. (Berg (1968), 39). The office of tamim, though purely ceremonial, still exists today and was also in existence in Mazrui times, though the office was given more formal duties and precise powers under the Zanzibar Sultanate. One of his more important privileges was his right of appeal to the sultan direct, when he could override the liwali.
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thelatha taifa: The Swahili citizens of Mombasa used to be divided into two main tribal confederations. One, known as 'the three tribes', thelatha taifa, consisted of the Tangana, Changanwe and Kilindini people, while the other, known as 'the nine tribes', tisa taifa, consisted of the Mvita, original inhabitants of Mombasa which included the Malindi clan as well, the Jomvu, the Mtwapa, the Kilifi and people from Pate, Shaka, Faza, Somalia and the Bajun islands. Within these main tribes were numerous sub-divisions. The Swahilis of Mombasa were originally made up of refugees who in hard times converged on Mombasa leaving their former settlements in ruins up and down the coast and they clustered around the walled city and the fort, seeking protection from the fierce Galla who were raiding the coast. The 'three tribes' originally settled on the other side of the island at Kilindini, but at some point beginning in the late 18th century moved into Mombasa and were accorded special protection by the Mazrui. Initially there was great animosity and rivalry between the two groupings but later in the 19th century all the Swahili decided to get together and co-operate as a single political entity which they called 'the twelve tribes' or thenashara taifa. Nowadays most Swahili have forgotten about their tribal groupings and indeed have thrown away their lineages, which their families used to treasure as proof that they were descended from some early settler from Arabia or the Gulf.

wa-nyika: see Nyika, (wa is a plural prefix in Swahili).

wa-ungwana: people of pedigree, culture and civilisation, denoting the ruling class of Arabs and Swahili during the 19th century.

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1. Fort Jesus library
2. The private library, notes, photographs, etc. of J. de V. Allen.
3. Unpublished research material of Janet McCrae and Rosemary Macdonald, Friends of Fort Jesus
4. Oral information from residents of Old Town Mombasa.

PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS

Hollis Collection, Nairobi

G.S.B.B. Collection, Nairobi

Jivanjee Collection, Mombasa

Friends of Fort Jesus Photographic Collection, Mombasa

MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Fort Jesus Museum

Lamu Museum

Zanzibar Museum

V & A Museum, collection of Indian woodwork stored in the Battersea warehouse.

