



# Lamu

AN ARTIST'S IMPRESSION

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# Why Lamu?

I was inspired to commission this book on Lamu after seeing Sophie's spirited paintings and hearing Errol's lyrical stories. I came to Lamu by accident in 2006 when a cancelled flight to Zanzibar left me stranded in Nairobi wondering what to do with myself. As guide-books hail Lamu as the jewel of Kenya's coast, I decided to take a look. From the moment of landing, I was enchanted. Within three days of my arrival, I was the owner of a plot of land in Shela village, near the sand dunes flanking the 12 kilometre stretch of Shela beach. I owe this stroke of luck more to the persuasive powers of the man who sold me the plot than my impulsive desire for a new challenge.

Lamu is a place like no other, partly because limited transport to the island (it is only accessible by plane or boat, and has no roads or cars) has kept it remote and unaffected by major development. But what struck me most was the warmth of the Lamuans whose talent for communication is exceptional. No doubt this ability has roots in the past, as traders required skills for negotiation, but it is just as likely to be influenced by their rich heritage of poetic expression and a love for singing stemming from their particular practice of Islam. The Lamuans have always been storytellers and enchanting listeners down the generations. Nowadays, the need to survive is paramount and to make the best of whatever opportunities arise on this tiny island.

Lamu has taught me patience and to appreciate the *salaams* of strangers. It has shown me that it is possible to inhabit very different worlds and feel that I belong in all of them. Of course, spending long stretches of time in Lamu has also accentuated my otherness, and highlighted how rooted I am in my western European heritage. As a collector of art myself, it is only human nature to bring together the things you feel most passionate about. Inviting international painters to Lamu synthesised my love of Impressionist painting and the Archipelago. Every vista in Lamu offers potential for a great painting. The light is extraordinary, the colours surprising, the scenes unique enough to convince me that such a stimulating environment would inspire painters and artists in all mediums. I was curious too, about how Lamuans would respond to interpretation by creative strangers. I enjoy the provocations that come from moving between different cultures. They challenge us to reflect on ourselves, and our place in the world. I anticipate that artists who come to Lamu will experience discomfort as well as delight, and I believe that the best art comes from an effort to mediate such dualities. It gives me enormous pleasure to offer talented foreign artists and the people of Lamu a chance to interact. My hope is that the works emerging out of every festival will travel far and wide, telling the story of Lamu: a small island, historically and culturally rich, inhabited by people with big hearts.

Herbert Menzer Patron of Lamu Painters' Festival





## *I n t r o d u c t i o n*

A silent sanctuary from the hustle and bustle of the town's lively main square, the Lamu library lies hidden away on the first floor of the Fort. Only the throb of ceiling fans interrupts this preserve of musty vintage encyclopedias and well-thumbed, spineless books. The history of the Archipelago, juggling for space with government surveys, is written by eminent authors and archaeologists. The facts might be superseded by later research - the library cards in their neat little pockets are stamped with dates from 30 years ago. But, the first sentence of a booklet on traditional wedding customs resonates with aficionados of Lamu today: "When I first went to Lamu in 1969, I was, like most visitors captivated by the charm of the town".

What is it that makes this little piece of Africa such a magnet for artists, artisans, writers, film-makers and poets? As one artist put it "there is something about boarding the ferry with the town emerging across the water and I ask myself: Why have I stayed away for so long? I am overwhelmed by how much subject matter, from the architecture and the people, there is to paint". A Russian artist, on her fourth trip to the Island, mentioned how easy it is to paint here "the images just appear on my page."

Is it the centuries of history, the moon-influenced tides and winds governing tradition and culture jostling with the contrasting tangled spaghetti of electric wiring, mobile phone kiosks and neon signs? Or is it the influence of the crafts of Lamu, handed down through the generations of artisans: wood carvers fashioning furniture and doors in alleyway workshops or plasterers moulding niches on site? The calligraphy, ancient love of poetry and music? Donkeys piled with sacks, the only mode of transport on the island; goats driven to market past the intricately carved doors, mingling with *bui bui* clad women, their kohl-lined eyes peeping through their *hijabs*?

If only Turner, Sargent or even Monet had the opportunity to visit these Islands, what art would they have created?







## *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*

*An anonymous corsair navigating by compass credited Hippalus as author of the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. He reckoned that having discovered the Indian Ocean Monsoons, only someone with the insight of the Greek geographers, possessed enough vision to attempt crossing the Indian Ocean as a faster way to south India, than following the coastline.*

*The oscillations of the north and south monsoons, navigated by compass from the Gulf of Aden along the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean in 45 AD initiated vigorous trading for a thousand years defining a new mercantile civilization. Awareness of the kusi and kaskazi along the east coast of Africa enabled Captains - nahodas, to dawdle, sometimes more than one season in port – gauging the weeks needed to fill their holds to capacity before grasping the tillers of huge sambuks and booms.*

*Plying this route, they enriched themselves beyond their dreams. From April, they cut through awesome swells as the ‘kaskazi’ blew them from the Gulf of Aden to Mozambique. From mid November, they offloaded as they went, ornate chests and other furniture from India, silks, muslins, glass, porcelain vessels, beads, dried dates, figs, almonds and eastern spices such as cinnamon and myrrh.*

*Their holds were laden with burthens of slaves from Zanzibar (Lamu bought slaves too), ivory, copra, sugar cane, shark liver, coconut and sim-sim oils, ghee, wheat, dried fish, turtle shells, sisal bags and rope plus boriti poles by the ton, cut from Lamu mangroves for construction in the Gulf.*

*Risk to life particularly on the kusi regarded as ‘the male wind’, was ever present.*

*From the south, blowing strongly, propelling the merchant traders north, the kusi rendered the ocean turbulent, dangerous and dark “like an elephant’s stomach” churning and unpredictable for thousands of sea miles.*

*The nahodas bargained for Rhino horn destined for dagger handles, the symbols of Yemeni manhood, more valuable than gold. Pulverised horn fetched more still, when the granules were sold as an aphrodisiac from April to July, to the Chinese. Who, more advanced as usual had already relied on the ‘kaskazi’ to deliver to the Ming Emperor of the T’ang Dynasty (AD 618-907) the gift of a giraffe strapped onto the deck of a junk, setting the fashion for live exotic gifts. In the S’ung Dynasty (AD 1127-1279) eastern potentates of the Imperial Palace in Beijing, received a variety of African wild animals. Their pandering to fashion, continuing to cull the riches of Africa.*







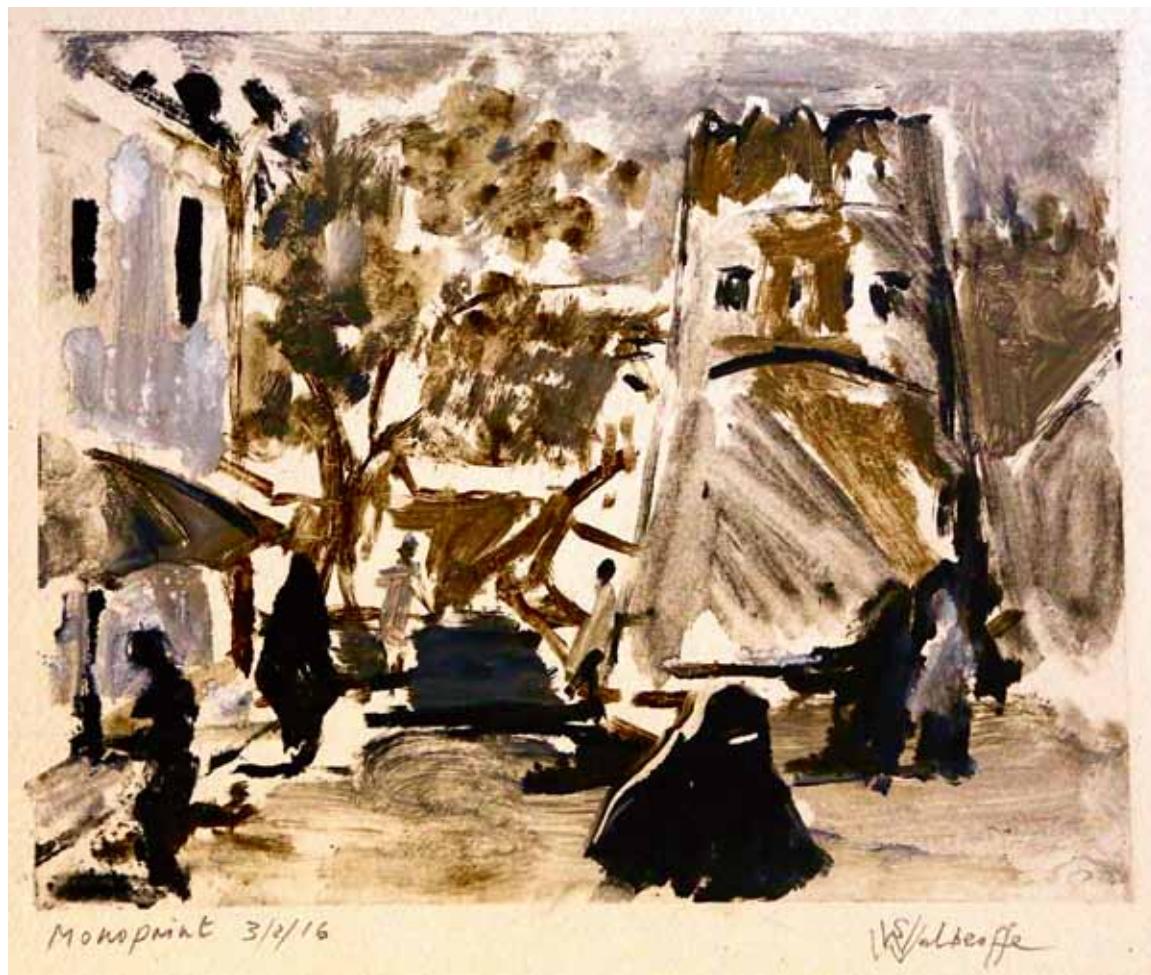
## *Roots of the Past*

The cannon that permanently point out to sea on the waterfront today, combined with the musty Chinese porcelain and medieval amphorae in Lamu Museum, provide an inkling of the Archipelago's place in the story of the trade winds. The evocatively titled, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, by a Greek author, contains the first written evidence of Lamu. However, archeological discoveries date the first settlements on the islands of Lamu, Manda and Pate to as early as 800 BC.

As soon as ancient sailors understood that timing was key to harnessing monsoon winds across the Indian Ocean, lucrative commodities travelled in the holds of Dhows, between Bombay, Persia, Zanzibar and East Africa. Lamu provided safe harbourage, potable water and fresh food to the mariners and traders. Dhow captains or *nahodas* and their crew came to settle on the islands and married the local inhabitants. Through this cultural integration evolved the Swahili, a people with their own distinct language and culture. During the wars generated by the schisms in early Islam, the winds also brought over religious refugees.

The oral chronicles of Lamu and Pate islands, handed down the generations, tell of forebears who descended from displaced heirs of the Prophet Mohammed, bringing Muslim piety and culture.









This practice unfortunately continued well into the 20th Century. Further pressure on Seyyid's successor, Barghash, to halt slavery began to have a knock on effect for the Lamuan landowners. Without the use of forced labour, crippling taxes and incursions by Chief Simba of Witu province on the mainland, and his band of runaway slaves, estate owners struggled to maintain harvests. Lamu also found itself an unsuspecting pawn in the German and British 'scramble for Africa'. The Germans coveted abundant natural wealth on the mainland and treaties were negotiated between German explorers and African chiefs including Chief Simba to create a German Protectorate. The old German Post Office in Lamu Town is a reminder of Germany's proximity in annexing this part of the coast.

The Anglo-German treaty of 1886 resulted in the carving up of East Africa. The Sultan of Zanzibar was left with a ten-mile strip of coastline including the Lamu Archipelago that was later leased to the British. Administrative colonial rule was installed by pecking order through Provincial Commissioners, District Commissioners and District Officers who were frequently stymied by the Swahili disdain for outsiders. Despite complaining of the heat and disease, these new 'two-year-wonders' fell in love with bare-footed Swahili civilisation.



The world wars had little impact on the Archipelago despite its physical proximity to the battlefields of German East Africa. Which comprised in World War I, of Tanganyika and of Somalia in World War II. Gradually the imposition of new taxes, emancipation of slaves and the loss of labour contributed to a dignified decline in Lamu's fortunes. Younger generations began to drift away in search of better opportunities in Mombasa.

Following Kenya's independence in 1962, numerous initiatives boosted Lamu's economy such as the government scheme enticing up-country farmers for the Kikuyu Settlement Scheme on Mpeketoni.

Despite the weather-worn, collapsing, architecture and open drains, Lamu's indestructible charm attracted artists, Bohemians, individualists and eccentrics. By the mid 1970's their enthusiasm gave rise to a concerted effort to save the inimitable town and way of life. A long, slow restoration process was undertaken and the old Fort, which had been used as a jail since 1910, was handed over to the National Museums of Kenya in 1984.

In 2001, Lamu Town was given UNESCO World Heritage status in recognition for its unique history, architectural and cultural heritage.



## Shipwrecks and Chief Simba

*Ships were wrecked in the vicinity of the Archipelago from time to time. If a dhow struck a rock off Kiunga, an entire crew with as many as seventy souls aboard might perish, along with its cargo. Discovery of some new corner of Africa in those days had a psychological prelude to the long held belief that the whole of the dark continent was there for the taking.*

*Visitors have always lingered on in the Archipelago, drawn to the mixed sensibility of African and Arabian heritage. The hybrid Swahili culture embracing language, and architecture appealed especially to individuals of an independent nature. Romantic spirits even nowadays seek out the island. They might be the sort who, leaving behind a sensational scandal elsewhere, find respite in Lamu's beauty.*

*However, Lamu had its critics: the brother of the author, Rider Haggard, who was an Honorary Consul in Zanzibar, reported in 1883, after visiting Witu that Lamu is a "nest of hornets" laying much of the blame at the feet of the dreaded Galla Chief, Simba. His strength of 3000 cohorts was "composed chiefly of all the malcontents, bankrupts and felons of the surrounding country and v. largely also, of runaway slaves." Yet the wily Simba, always convinced visitors of his friendly nature, and his brother in law was just as double-faced, accusing Haggard of insulting Simba, and blackmailing the consul if he did not agree to smuggle guns and powder from Lamu, threatening him with punishment. Simba's duality is exemplified, by the way he invited the Swahilis to hold a day long market at Msanga and stay the night. They did so. Before morning, every one of them had been butchered. No-one ever discovered the reason for the massacre. Haggard estimated that Simba owned 600 personal slaves and that his main source of wealth was the selling of captives to the Somalis, from nearby plundered village.*

*E.T.*





## *Hidabu or 'The Sacred Meadow'*

*Lamu's history, straddling eons, was handed down by firelight stories. Such as how, between 786 – 809 AD, Syrian, Iraqui and Persian militiamen explored the East African coast. Al Rashid, the caliph, despatched 12,000 militia, we are told; the first 6000 carried weaponry, disembarking at Vuyoni as the spot is known (at the northern end of Lamu island). The second flotilla came ashore at Hidabu – Arab for hill – half way to Shela. Their fishing village was a place of contentment. The topography of the Archipelago prevented any inkling to Hidabuans that the Vuyoni existed. The former began trading in live cowries, dropping them into pits, covered with sand to defeat the appalling stench of rotting molluscs. Insects picked the cowries clean which were traded as legal currency.*

*What went wrong? The Vuyoni and Hidabuans discovered one another's existence. Squabbling over who was to rule, began a pattern of interminable hostility which saw arrows fly, as if joined by dots, until, the fighting having robbed them of sustenance, ended, the sworn enemies having reached exhaustion. Farmers grew wheat and reaped harvests again; fishermen fished in peace. The groups even sought reconciliation, repeated thrice in this catastrophic charade. When the Hidabuans initiated a truce, the Vuyoni begrudgingly claimed how the initiative had actually been theirs. More clashes occurred. One herald from each faction agreed, in the spirit of peace to meet midway, though a Vuyoni Sage cautioned, "Do not put your arms down because the day of peace is indeed the day of war." Indeed, the Hidabuans played a filthy trick: carrying hidden weaponry, they slaughtered every adult male Vuyoni. History has consigned the massacre to a footnote, but Hidabu's fallen martyrs were remembered in the bloody battleground by 'The Sacred Meadow'.*







## Water

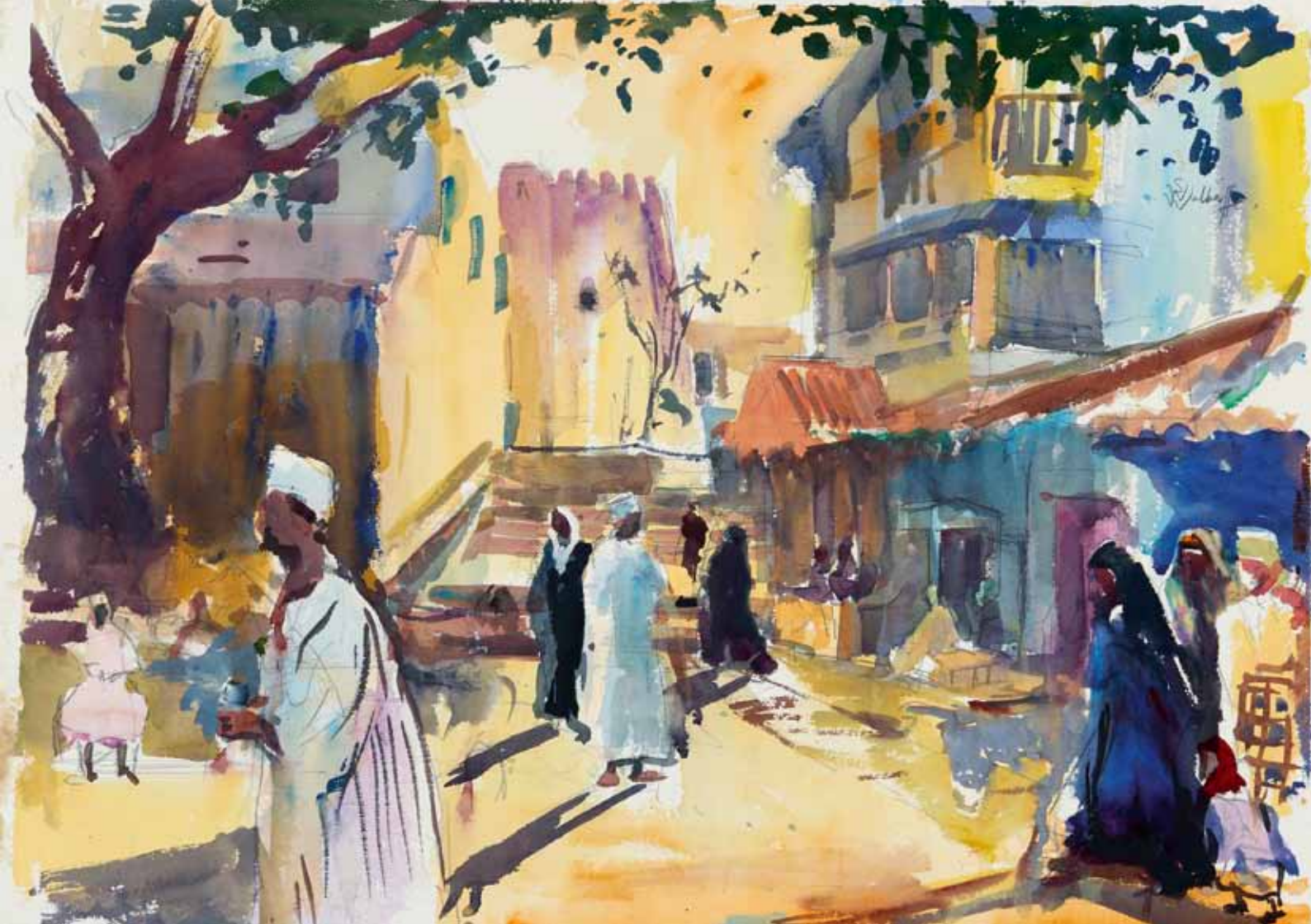
Jack Couffer, whose Lamu house was at Shela, where he authored *'The Cats of Lamu'*, found most impressive. . . "is the bathroom and lavatory system. . . Each. . . has at least two, many three, four or even five. The lavatories emptied into deep pits. . . distant enough from nearby wells. . . water is taken away in open gutters through the streets or by means of underground tunnels. The money spent on these can only have been equalled by the money spent on qibas of mosques with their trifoliate arches, chamfered pilasters. . . and intricately decorated niches." Water, filtered through the sand dunes at Shela into wells has always been and will always be regarded as ultra precious.

Visitors travelled miles overland to see the Cockney founder of Petley's Inn a pronounced tourist magnet in himself, having survived being sat on by an elephant and strangling a leopard with his bare hands. New arrivals were treated to Percy Petley's bellowing, "Ma-omet! Show'em to the bridal suite." Up the wooden stairs they trooped as Petley issued rasping instructions from the rear. "Soap yerself first. Use yer bucket of water ter rinse yerself, because yer won't get no more war-er. It's short 'ere." Soaping done, the rope was pulled. An upward glance exposed a dark fellow crouching on a platform above, tipping water in a gush from a pail over the naked occupant's head. The 'Bridal Suite' a mere cubicle, was the largest of six rooms. Each was divided by stout walls open to the rafters, supporting a mkuti roof. Noises from neighbouring guests left nothing to the imagination.









## Behind the Austere Walls



Like the ‘antique living cities’ of Morocco, Lamu’s architecture is just as distinctive, influenced by Persian, Omani and Indian details. The earliest surviving houses in the town date back to the 18th Century. Builders had a good understanding of proportion, use of light and airflow as well as developing their own aesthetic decoration. Tradition based on a matrilineal heritage decreed that the wife’s family supply a house for the newly-weds. Upon the birth of a daughter, the family would start preparing the building lime so that it would mature and strengthen in readiness for her marriage.

Protected by thick forbidding walls constructed from lime mortar and coral rag, the only entrance is through a set of wooden doors with carved portals, some decorated with Muslim sayings. Guests are restricted to female friends and relatives who announce their arrival by shouting *hodi* (may I come in?) three times and await the answering *karibu* (welcome). Visitors are led into an open courtyard that filters the natural light through a series of narrow galleries, dictated in width by the *boriti* or mangrove poles used as ceiling beams.

In their heyday, when occupied by the wealthy Swahili *wangwana* merchants, the galleries were lined with brightly coloured fabrics concealing intricately carved daybeds. Woven mats covered the floors, and large spherical brass trays on little stands were used to serve food. The master of the house would have his own imposing wooden throne inlaid with ivory. The usual friezes and plaster niches lined the white-washed walls displaying Chinese porcelain and colourful Delftware.

The last gallery was reserved for the master bedroom where the entire back wall was covered by ornate geometric plasterwork designs called *vidaka* holding more porcelain and other treasures. A turtle-shaped carved niche, a *kasa* embellished other walls with the inhabitants’ most valuable belongings, often a prized copy of the Koran.



W. J. P.

W. J. P.

## Henna



From the Bronze age, ornate designs, made possible by the application of henna paste have dyed, silk, leather, wood and coloured human hair and beards. Although, the Queen of Sheba was reputed to have Congolese white peacocks, depicted in her train, in the traditional manner of ornamentation the word 'picot' is used, a distortion of the pronunciation for the bird, which presents the possibility that the plumage and iridescence of the male peacock tail feathers being present is strong, linked or inspired by the patterns painted on human skin. Believed to bring blessings and good luck, it is not too fanciful to conjure the range and beauty of the peacock motif. As guardians to royalty in Babylonia and Persia, where, engraved on thrones and sculpture they offer more than inspiration of 'peacock' etymologically as 'hinna pico'.

Traditionally the Henna leaf is dried, milled and sifted. The resulting powder mixed with lemon juice, strong tea, or other mildly acidic liquid to a toothpaste-like consistency. The henna mix then 'rests' for 6 to 24 hours, before the patterns are drawn with a fine twig. These will not fade too quickly if each colour has two hours to 'set'. This is why complete designs can take up to 12 hours and how the *Lawsonia inermis*, or henna tree has been used since antiquity.

It is an ancient custom in the Archipelago of Lamu and de rigeur for brides before weddings. Overseen by an aunt or old married sister, women apply it to the bride's extremities: fingers and hands, toe nails, the soles of the feet and lower leg, instructing the wife as they work, on how to please her new husband. One passage of the Prophet Mohammed, urges Muslim women to apply henna decoration so that feminine hands could be distinguished from those of the male. This is why 'hinno' - the art of body ornamentation - titillates the male.

In recent years, black synthetic dye has been used, being easier to apply and lasting longer on human skin. But, like most short cuts or modernization, lacks the intrinsic beauty of the original recipe and method.

E.T.





## Peponi Hotel

There are hotels and then there is Peponi. Swahili for ‘place of winds’, *peponi* also means ‘paradise’. An inimitable mix of hotel, good restaurant, local bar and rendezvous for the jet setters and settlers, Peponi’s is the heartbeat of Shela. Two ancient cannon guard the steps leading up from the busy beach, overlooked by the shady verandah. This is a popular social spot for the dhow captains and dreadlocked ‘beach boys’ who speak a polymath of languages – their chatter lapped up by tourists sporting locally braided hair and hennaed feet. Another verandah leads off Peponi’s small but busy bar where a striking portrait of Charles, the hotel’s much-loved barman, painted by a resident artist from the Painters’ Festival presides over the bar stools.

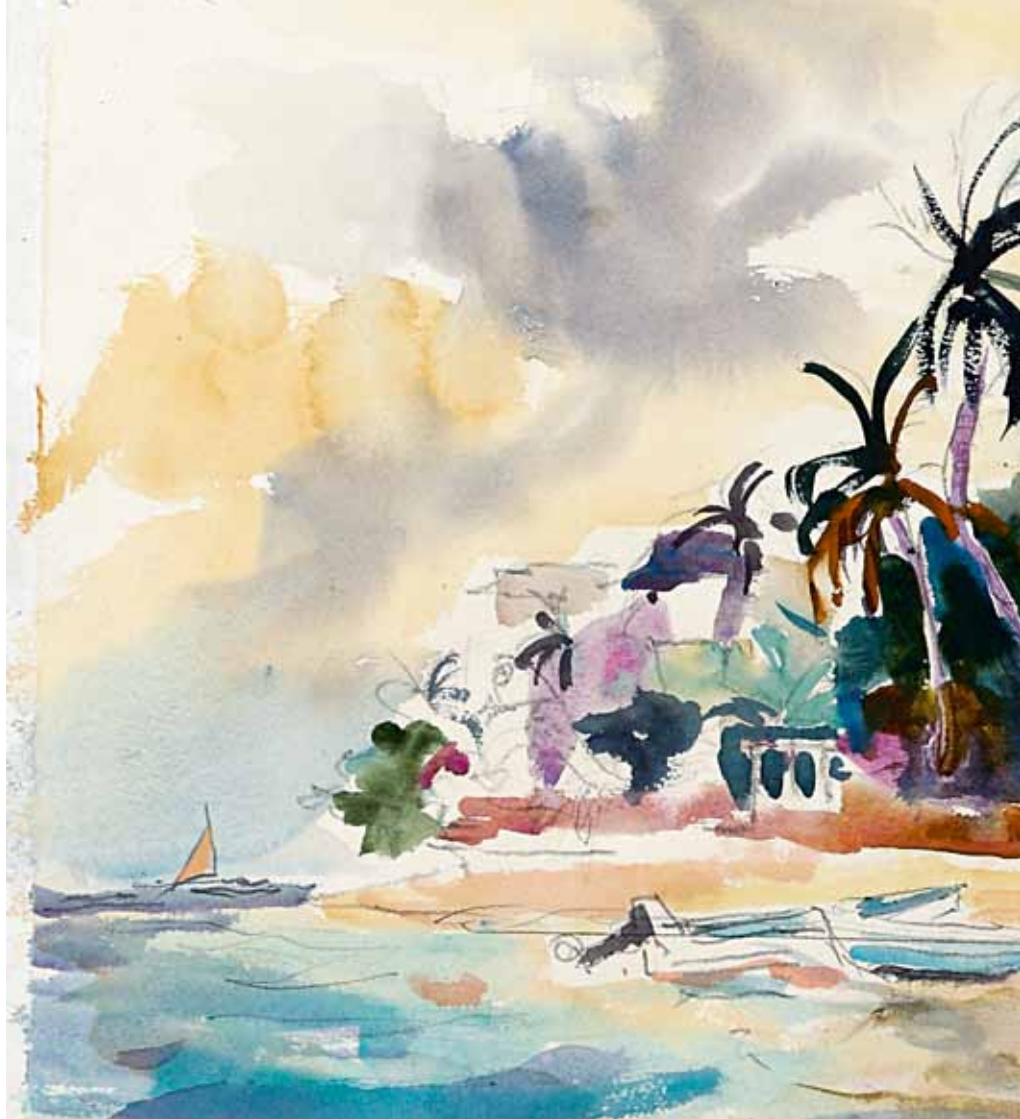
In the 1930’s, Peponi was the home of the Nestlé heir, Henri Bernier, a keen palm collector and bridge player. The house was left uninhabited until it was purchased by the Korschen family. In the introduction to his unfinished cookery book, Lars Korschen described the events that led to Peponi’s transformation into a hotel: after Independence, the family farm in the Aberdares had been sold under the government’s compulsory purchase scheme and his father, Lemme, treated the family to a holiday in Malindi before the inevitable return to Denmark. Acting on a whim, he chartered a small plane to Lamu. The discovery of Bernier’s abandoned property prompted him to buy it on impulse. In 1967 Lemme and his wife, Wera, opened the four rooms to paying guests with Wera in charge of the kitchen and housekeeping and Lemme as barman. Lemme’s early death, dictated that Lars leave his cosmopolitan lifestyle as an art student in London, waiting on tables and painting stage sets. He rushed back to give his mother a hand, imagining that it would be a temporary arrangement. However, Lars was a natural hotelier. His fluency in Swahili and popularity with the Shela villagers melded with his talents as host. Aided by the villagers and boatmen, he became a past-master in misdirecting tabloid journalists and the paparazzi. With this assurance of peace and anonymity, the hotel soon gained popularity as an escape for film stars, rock legends, royalty, musicians and tycoons.

The hotel continued as a family business with his brother Nils in charge of fishing charters and his wife Carol, co-running the hotel whilst raising a family, setting up a village school, founding Turtle Watch and expanding Bernier’s original garden of exotic palms. Sadly, like his father, Lemme, Lars’ life was cut short by illness. On his untimely death, Lars was celebrated in an obituary in the London Telegraph, a testament to his hard work and popularity among his guests and Shela residents. Carol took over the reins of the hotel which she manages with bustling efficiency, aided by Andrew Gruselle and a team of local personnel.

Expanded to 28 rooms, Peponi’s is set in sprawling gardens and terraces overlooking the sea. Swing beds strung from coconut palms are an invitation to lie back and take in the views of the always-busy beachfront. A swimming pool is hidden in the ruins of a traditional

house, the original bathroom transformed into a changing room and its *vidaka* wall exposed to the elements.

The tranquillity of Peponi's during the day, serving fresh juices and the refreshing *madafu* (coconut water served in its green husk), is a sharp contrast to its night-time transformation with requests for the hotel's own cocktail 'Old Pal'. Fondly referred to as the 'pub', Peponi's is the watering hole for an eclectic assortment of Shela residents and guests. The regulars have their particular perches and a vacant chair or barstool provokes concern as to the whereabouts of a certain resident. An ordinary evening can sometimes spontaneously combust into a hedonistic, bacchanalian atmosphere with the drink flowing, tongues loosening and occasional dancing. There are a few respectable grandmothers who have vague recollections of climbing on to the bar to 'shake their booty!' A whisper of what happened the 'night before' might be alluded to, but there is an unwritten rule of what takes place in Peponi's goes no further..



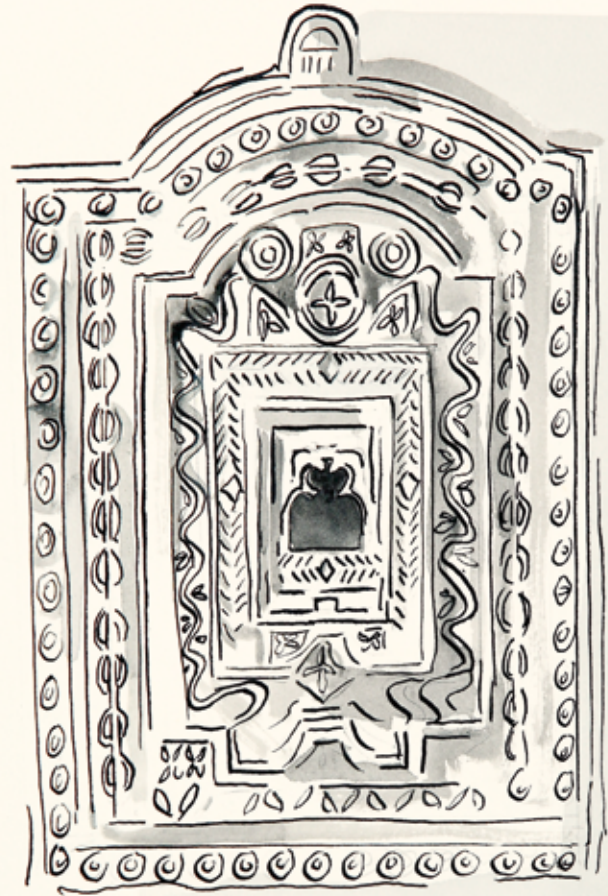




artisans into elegant floral flourishes interspersed with stylized motifs that evoked anything from a lotus flower to prawns. The same shapes appear on wood and soft plaster stuccowork: skilfully etched geometric mouldings are often combined with flowing swirls.

The craftsmen of Siyu, on Pate Island, became renowned for their skills, and were specialists in furniture-making. No grand home was complete without a pair of Siyu thrones flanking the entrance to the master bedroom. The *kiti cha mpingu*, an elaborate ebony and ivory inlaid chair with a complex string weave seat, was reserved for the master of the house. Beds ranged from the 'Pate' style with decorative spindles, presented by mother of the bride-to-be, to the simple daybeds with turned legs and woven palm matting. Richly panelled in brass plate, 'Zanzibari' chests were used to hold valuables.

The Swahili have always been deeply superstitious, and much of the jewellery produced on the Archipelago incorporated amulets. Each house was thought to have its personal djinn or *finju* that protected the inhabitants. Porcelain dishes lining the stucco *vidaka* were intended to discourage bad spirits. Perhaps the dhows that brought the ideas, the scholars and craftsmen also smuggled in artistic spirits and djinns who settled on the islands and influenced such a prolific output of ingenuity and creativity.





## *Jahazis, Mtepes & Dhows*

The only way to reach Lamu Archipelago is by boat, and the thrilling anticipation of watching the shoreline inch into focus from the water only adds to Lamu's considerable charm. A wide variety of boats ply the channel between Manda and Lamu. The wooden-hulled water taxis, cumbersome barges and speedboats (known as *motaboati*) churn up the water as they transport everything from merchandise and passengers to building materials and the occasional donkey. The term "fill her up" takes on a whole new connotation with the sight of boats lining up to refuel at the oil-smeared barge, moored off Petley's jetty, its deck piled high with yellow plastic jerry cans.

The distinctive design of the dhow or *dau* is as synonymous with Lamu as is its architecture. The origins of the name dhow are unknown and could be the corruption of the Portuguese *nao* or an original Swahili word. However, dhow has become the generic name used in Arabia, Persia and India to describe these trading vessels that have sailed the Indian Ocean and East African coast for aeons. *The Periplus*, that sea-mariners' handbook written in the 1st Century, contains a detailed description of indigenous boats, made of planks 'sewn' together with coconut fibre. Marco Polo was unimpressed by the 'sewn' dhows he saw in the Arabian Gulf, believing that they would be unseaworthy in a storm. The lashed hulls of these *mtepes*, possibly due to the myth that sea magnets would drag nailed vessels under, have survived well into the 20th Century.

Dhows are the marine workhorses, at the mercy of the capricious Indian Ocean. These sailing vessels come in many sizes but all retain the same basic design. *Mashuas* are the sleek smaller boats while the ocean-going *Jahazi* is the largest dhow (up to 60 tonnes) complete with a tiny toilet box projecting from each stern. The distinguishable white cotton lateen sails are attached to the coconut or teak wood masts







Fishing families prefer the scaleless blue *taji* fish, smoked *pueza* octopus or the runs of sardines that are swept up in the shallows.

Successful fishermen, broad smiles beaming from their lined, weather-beaten faces carry freshly caught large rock cod, snapper or red mullet up the beach in the hope of an instant sale.

The mangrove swamps are the rich nursery of

seafood dwellers and the species of fish to be had seems limitless, hence beady-eyed Herons, Egrets and Mangrove Kingfishers perch on branches above. Perhaps the most sensational bird-watching experience occurs at twilight on the scrappy atolls of Manda Bay. A scarlet flash is followed by another and another until the sky is flecked with dots descending onto branches brought to life with the flame-red and turquoise feathers of Carmine Bee Eaters. Squawking in deafening cacophony, flocks rise into a fiery cloud, only to resettle into another bush. With sundown, their plumage takes on a richer, deeper hue, until the velvet blackness of night leaves only their chatter.

Will this almost spiritual feeling of revelling in nature's palette soon vanish as the buoys and beacons of the Chinese contracted to build the deep water port off Lamu bob uncomfortably close to the Carmine Bee Eaters' roosting site? What will become of those whose livelihood comes from the sea?





*The Sardine Catchers.*







## *The Notable & Notorious*

It is easy to see how Lamu island with its clusters of white-washed houses interspersed with lush tropical vegetation and bright bougainvillea bushes inspires so many visitors to make a home here. The very ethos of Swahili culture is derived from the dhow captains, explorers, traders and religious refugees who arrived on the monsoon - and never left. Artists, musicians and writers have always been drawn to the island, maybe attracted by the air of mystery, the sense of light and the fusion of Swahili history with the colours of modern-day living. Anish Kapoor made the island his temporary retreat, Yeudi Menhuin gave an informal concert during his visit and the German composer, Hans Werner Henze, said that his 9th Symphony was inspired by his beach walks on Lamu. The writers Cynthia Salvadori and Errol Trzebinski both made Lamu their permanent home.

Lamu has also attracted its fair share of eccentrics who were seduced by the romantic, cheap and nonconformist lifestyle. Many of their names have been consigned to oblivion, but some of their antics are still remembered. One of the unconventional bachelors to settle on Lamu was Coconut Charlie Whitton who arrived on the island from Mombasa in 1911 and maintained large plantations on the mainland. A renowned misogynist, he collected Swahili furniture and artefacts and had Lamu's only automobile dealership, despite the

fact that there were no vehicles on the island. Another early settler was Percy Petley. He is said to have pitched up in Lamu, after serving as a scout under Selous. On selling his coconut plantation on the mainland, he opened Lamu's first inn and stories of Petley's plumbing and hospitality were infamous. These two early European inhabitants despised each other and would refuse to walk on the same street. 'Daddy' Cornell, another eccentric, was posted to Lamu to oversee British interests and eventually retired on mainland Witu where he was later murdered by Somali *shifia* although there were plenty of rumours that it was over his Swahili boyfriend.

White hunters such as Douglas 'Wompo' Collins, Bunny and his brother Ba *kichecho* (the one who laughs) Allen retreated to the island. 'Wompo Collins' was a renowned raconteur with a wicked sense of humour and an elegant turn of phrase who, in his memoir, "Tales from Africa," conjured up a vibrant image of Lamu in the 1970's. In the book, he details his abhorrence of the hippies who descended on the island, a disgust shared by Colonel Pink who took over Petleys Inn.

These characters are all long gone but Lamu, despite being deemed unsafe by some western governments, still has an unexplainable allure for another generation of restless and romantic travellers, who have decided that the island is the ideal haven in which they can settle.





## *The Disco Dancer*

When Islanders wanted to take a break from the Archipelago, Dougie Collins included, they would abandon the beach boys, transvestites, homosexuals, houris, lotus eaters and women in deep purdah shrouded in black, and escape to a vast open patch of ground at Mkowe, which was from 7am, The Tawakal Bus Company terminal. Their coach daubed on all sides green, orange, yellow and blue was strictly licensed to carry forty eight passengers. Double seating was packed with three and the aisle accommodated the occasional goat and two dozen or so unhappy looking scrawny fowls. At the sound of the Disco Dancer's horn being blown, off the vehicle went, like a panting dragon with the driver cranking up to eighty or ninety kilometers an hour. Every application of the brakes, squealed alarmingly. The perilous journey could be completed by dark that evening, but sometimes it took several days to reach Mombasa, thanks to a blown tyre, or a swerve to avoid wildlife ending with a collision against a massive baobab tree. Disco Dancer, dwarfing the bush on either side of the track bore down relentlessly scattering in its path, water bearers, baboons, livestock or a lone cyclist bearing the words "Jesus Loves Me" on the back or his t-shirt, wobbling off in his desperation to get out of the way.

Witu called for a brief stop. Next the long line of doum palms heralded the approach to Garsen, then the ferry on the Tana River, where the birdlife was rich. Except in the long rains when the plain became impassable, flocks of white egrets, and marabou storks picked through human refuse. Over the Sabaki River bridge, it was headlong into Malindi for refreshments. Buckets of water were poured into the Disco Dancer's innards while the driver checked the oil level with a dip stick.

Now Disco Dancer's retired. But in those early days of the Tawakal Bus service, it established essential links to the mainland, dependably carrying and returning commissions of every notion, twice daily, throughout the year unless economically unviable.



## Lamu Seafront

The Omani fort, Mosque and old town in the background. Boats come and go. Feeling seasick as I paint in the boat on the rough sea.

The wind strengthens in the afternoon whipping up the waves which wet my paper, time to stop. To paint such a large picture in a boat is a challenge. I use a large board that hinges in half, paper rolled up in plumbing tubes fixed on with a staple gun, (tape would be useless in this wind) and OOIE (you in Kiswahili) is my helper who I first met when he was 14. Now a handsome young man, he has many friends and seems happy to be teased about helping "Mrs Painting."



## Shadow of Oman

I borrowed an empty chicken hut to lean my large drawing board on. A mop and bucket picture. I use a mop to do the first wash as the paper is so big then I use brushes taped to long sticks. The Kikuyu lady reluctantly let me move a filthy wooden crate down the street so I could position it better to rest my board. Heady smells. My paper slipped into the sewer, which I was sitting next to, so now it was authentic. Ooie prevented the many curious passers-by from crowding around too much so I could see the subject I was painting. By the time he returned from buying fresh mango juice, I was completely surrounded. Welcome to Lamu.



## Peponi Hotel

Peponi is my favourite hotel in the world. Beautiful flowers drip onto the sandy floor wherever you are. It's so friendly - how could you ever be lonely here? And they serve a mean margarita. Sitting in a boat called Lady Gaga, I started to paint at 7 am when the light is just hitting the front of the building and the shadows are still defined. It was fun, to watch all the locals going for their early morning walk and stop for coffee in front of the hotel. I have been here so often I recognize many of them. Quite busy traffic on the sea this morning. A boat drove into us. Apparently he was a learner.



## Swahili House

Inside the Lamu house museum, I painted exactly the same scene in 1988 and it hasn't changed. It's a small museum where one re-lives the Lamu way of life as it has been for hundreds of years. While I painted quietly I could hear the birds in the gardens. Many of the Lamu houses have beautiful walled gardens with grassy lawns and abundant flowers.

# Impression



## Riyadha Mosque

*I first painted this mosque in 1988 for an exhibition at the British Council and felt rather unwell, as unknowingly, I was pregnant with my daughter. I had no idea what was wrong and thought it might be malaria so I went to the Arab doctor behind a beaded curtain on Lamu's high street. He promised me much happiness and blessings from Allah. Returning 24 years later has brought me full circle as I paint Riyadhha Mosque once again.*



## Baraka Street

*I sat between two ladies selling charcoal and oranges. I got there first but it was their patch so they put themselves on either side. The temperature is 90 degrees with 90 degrees humidity. Sitting in the streets, I need to be covered up to respect the Muslim modesty. So now I am completely sweltering and surviving by drinking copious amounts of water with a wet cloth on my neck. There are no tourists as a curfew has been issued and everyone is too scared to come.*



## Baitil Aman

*Curfew... and the women are really stuck at home. I believe a lot of the rooftop walkways that the women used in the past have been destroyed because of building and development. I made great friends with Ramla many years ago.*



## Shadows in the morning

*Mr Isaiah Chepyator has his craft shop around the corner from here. One day, I went to frame some pictures for the Lamu Painters Festival exhibition but I got the measurements wrong. Isaiah told me to go and paint another knowing that I work fast. I sat on the steps of the mosque on the main street, watched by about fifty mischievous little boys through the bars of their madrassa class behind me. Two young men ran up and down the street wanting me to put them in the picture. I returned 40 minutes later to Isaiah who then framed it for the exhibition that evening. Isaiah is head of the arts and craft society in Lamu. I can see why.*

# Biographies

*Sophie Walbeoffe*

*Since I left the Wimbledon School of Art, my painting has taken me all over the world from Canada, Syria, Jordan and Jerusalem; but, since my first visit in 1988, Lamu has become the place that I return to year after year. I find the ever-changing vistas, cultural atmosphere and people always inspiring and I relish the challenge of sketching and painting plein-air in the crowded narrow streets, sun-baked rooftops and perilously rocking boats.*

*Julia Seth-Smith*

*My passion for Lamu began when I was a self-absorbed six year old. I loved hunting for sand dollars, winking out pieces of pottery and hearing the stories of ghosts that were supposed to inhabit Lamu Fort. I returned as a teenage tearaway by bus and dhow (exhilarating and terrifying); I wrote my dissertation (not very well) on the 18th Century houses and was romanced at Peponi's by my future husband. On one trip, I was enchanted by 'Wompo' Collins who still lamented the loss of his Somali mistress. But, it was years later when I met up with Sophie Walbeoffe and through her evocative sketches and paintings had my love of Lamu rekindled.*

*Errol Trzebinski*

*I first visited Lamu in 1973 by yacht. The acquisition of film rights from my first book, Silence Will Speak, on Denys Finch Hatton's relationship with Karen Blixen, enabled the screenplay for Out of Africa, allowing us to buy our house in town. We always planned to retire here and since 2006 Lamu has become my permanent home.*

*Herbert Menzer*

*I divide my time between Hamburg, my home town and Amsterdam, and since my first visit in 2006, Shela Village, where I devote several months a year indulging my passion for restoring coral-block houses following traditional building methods. In 2011, I found a way to combine my love of art and Lamu by creating the Lamu Painter's Festival, a bi-annual event which is rapidly gaining attention from international artists. My teams of builders inspired me to start the Shela Hat Festival which has become a regular part of the Lamu Festival Calendar.*

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