

***Lamu: Kenya's Enchanted Island.* George Abungu and Lorna Abungu. Carol Beckwith, Angela Fisher, David Coulson, and Nigel Pavitt, photographers. Ahmed Sheikh Nabhany, poet. New York: Rizzoli, 2009. 280 pp.¹**

Reviewed by C. Kurt Dewhurst

Lamu Island in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Kenya in East Africa, has a rich and complex history. Lamu has been shaped by multiple waves of cultural and economic historic forces from along the East African coast—as well as external European exploration and colonization. In recent decades there has been a growing appreciation for the distinct importance of Lamu as an embodiment of the visual and cultural layers of living history of this region. In the eyes of many Kenyans and East Africans, as well as those who have journeyed to Lamu, it is truly a remarkable repository of evidence of the past as well as a thriving site for the living cultural life of this region.

In 2001, Lamu received formal designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was recognized for its “outstanding universal value as a heritage site,” but also, in particular, for its extant “architectural, cultural, and religious heritage” (p. 233). As an exemplar of Swahili cultural heritage, it has been attracting the serious interests of scholars in ever-growing numbers as a site for study. In addition, Lamu has taken on importance as scholars have sought to better understand the arts and culture of East Africa—especially since this region has often been an overlooked part of the world.

Lamu: Kenya's Enchanted Island is an especially evocative portrait of this region. What is so impressive is the creative way that the expressive culture of Lamu is revealed to the reader by using the full palate of tools for artistic cultural expression in the presentation in this volume; combining the talents of noted cultural heritage scholars, gifted photographers, a master poet, and a talented illustrator. The result of this collaboration warrants attention by both the academic and general audience. George Abungu, former Director General of the National Museums of Kenya, and Lorna Abungu, former Executive Director of AFRICOM, have crafted rich cultural analysis and descriptions of the architecture, material cultures, arts, rituals, and traditions throughout this lavishly illustrated book.

It would be a mistake to treat this volume as simply a “coffee table” photographic record of an “enchanted place.” While clearly, many readers will seek out this volume for its handsome presentation of Lamu, it is much more than that. In fact, it represents an emerging new genre of books being produced in Africa that draw multiple talents from a broad range of contributors to capture the living cultural power of place. It all begins with sound ethnographic research combined with the penetrating skills and vision of experience photographers Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, who have worked extensively in Africa, along with David Coulson, the highly regarded photographer of Africa rock arts, and Nigel Pavitt, Kenyan author and photographer. In

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addition, Carol Beckwith also contributed sensitively rendered illustrations and details that enrich the interpretation.

The book is organized into section on the following topics: “Indian Ocean;” “Swahili Architecture;” “Arts of Lamu;” “Lamu Weddings;” “Island Festivals;” “Lamu Today;” and “Tradition and Innovation.” Each chapter opens with an original poem on the theme of the chapter that was written in Swahili and then translated into English. The poems by the internationally honored poet, Ahmed Sheikh Nabhany, are in themselves valuable interpretive elements that set the stage for the text, photos, illustrations, and captions.

The presentation of the peoples of Lamu is evident in so many ways. In spite of the tumultuous history of this island, the town of Lamu (the old town) has flourished in recent years. The past was colored by domination by shipping and wealthy slave owners who operated large plantation farms until the 1890s, but this trade and agricultural history has actually sustained Lamu over centuries. Some argue that the architectural achievements of Lamu actually benefited from the move of the main port to Mombasa, thereby relegating Lamu Town to a smaller regional port where the architectural record has been preserved. As a result today, Lamu has become a destination for not only scholars but for those seeking to experience Swahili cultural life—including its remarkable architectural landscape.

As a folklorist, the focus on the continuity of culture and the transmission of material folk cultural traditions is especially appealing. Special care is given to convey the role of how master artists are nurturing apprentices to ensure that cultural traditions are retained so they can play a valued role in Swahili culture today. The section on the “Arts of Lamu” conveys the accomplishments of the Swahili artists and craftsmen who make intricate plasterwork decoration on walls; carved and inlaid chairs; carved beds, chests, and doors; embroidered traditional hats (kofia); gold and silver jewelry; metalwork; and woven mats. The distinctive and powerful architectural forms of the past are presented along with a section devoted to the efforts to restore and even undertake adaptive use of historical buildings. The sections on “Lamu Weddings” and “Island Festival” are beautifully conveyed with keen insights on the related visual and performance traditions. While the text is limited, the combined impact of the photos, captions, illustrations, and poetry provides an inspired portrait of Lamu’s past and living cultural heritage.

This book is an important new contribution to the deeper understanding of the importance of the expressive culture of the African continent. It is also another demonstration of the power of effective scholarly and artistic collaboration to reveal and present the history of a place over time. It is hoped that it will foster more work in this vein by presenting interdisciplinary interpretations of the historical past and living culture of today.

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MacDowell and Kate Wells) of Siyazama: Traditional Arts Education in South Africa (Cape Town: David Kruts Publishers in cooperation with the University of Technology, forthcoming).