

Photographs: CYNTHIA SALVADORI

The Lamu Maulidi

This year's celebrations, while not blessed with the usual enormous crowds, were as moving and colourful as ever, reports Judy Aldrick.

If you can happily adjust to a pace that is slower than slow and adapt to a rhythm of life set by the sea and by the variables of tides and winds, then Lamu is the place for you.

Accessible only by boat, the town of Lamu off Kenya's northern coast still jealously guards its ancient traditions and remains one of the last bastions of Swahili culture. Here life's unhurried daily routines follow a pattern largely undisturbed by the modern world, and donkey and dhow still provide your only means of transport.

But for one week each year even Lamu hits the headlines, coming alive as Muslim pilgrims and curious onlookers from all over the world converge on the

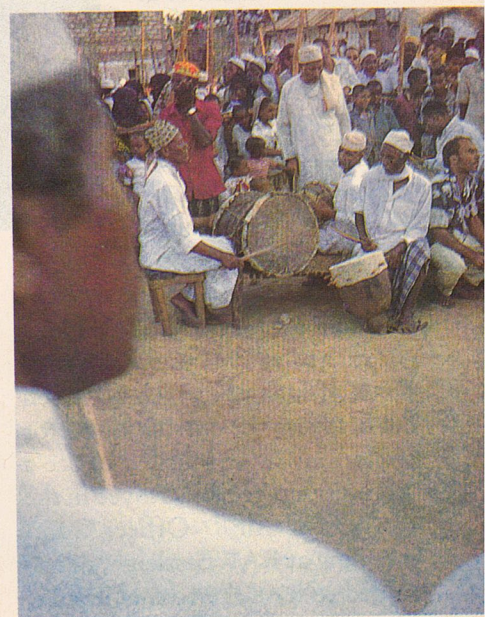
historic town for the Maulidi celebrations.

Idd Milad ul Nabi (Maulidi) is the religious festival marking the birth of the Prophet Mohammed, which is commemorated by Muslims in much the same way as Christmas Day is by a minority of devout Christians. The Prophet's birthday falls on the twelfth day of the third Islamic month, *Rabi al-Awal*, which this year fell in July.

The Islamic calendar is a lunar one, and its twelve-month year is slightly shorter than that of the Gregorian calendar. The years are reckoned from the hegira or flight of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD. It is therefore not easy to match up the two dat-

ing systems. Although *Milad* means birth in Arabic, the *Maulidi* — or recitations in praise of Mohammed's birth — may also be performed on other occasions, particularly when a joyful event is being celebrated.

In Lamu, the birth of the Prophet has become the focus of a major celebration. The religious ceremonies continue throughout *Rabi al-Awal*, reaching their climax on the last Thursday of the



Maulidi recitations at Lamu's Riyadha Mosque are heralded by a deafening ngoma (right), and by a dusk display of traditional swordsmanship (top left) outside the mosque. The celebrations conclude the following afternoon with a lively religious procession along the waterfront (top right), complete with musicians and dancers.



month, when the main festival takes place, with a special *Maulidi* reading in the Riyadhha Mosque.

The whole town turns out to enjoy what amounts to several days of celebrations. Although a *Maulidi* is traditionally held by all Muslims to commemorate the actual birthday of their Prophet, such an extended and elaborate celebration is unusual. The Lamu *Maulidi* has become famous for this reason, and visitors pour in, not only from the outlying islands and nearby towns, but also from Mombasa, Nairobi, Tanga, Dar es Salaam, Mogadishu, Kampala, the Comoros Islands and even from as far afield as Morocco and Pakistan.

Most of these visitors come for the final week, when the town fairly buzzes with activity and takes on a highly festive atmosphere. Some Muslim communities, however, frown upon the Lamu *Maulidi*, which they see as frivolous and overly concerned with pageantry and secular amusements.

In its present form, the festival was introduced to Lamu by

Habib Salih bin Alawi Abdullah Jamal al-Layl, who is revered locally as the town's patron saint. Born on the Comoros Islands in c. 1850, he came to live in Lamu at the age of fifteen. His family originated from the Hadramaut in the Yemen, where the title *Habib* is used as an alternative to *Seyyid* or *Sharif* to denote a blood descendant of the Prophet Mohammed.

Sharifs are accorded great respect in the Lamu region, as the people believe them to be held in special favour by God and endowed with unique powers to ward off evil and disease. A studious but sickly boy, Habib Salih was sent by his parents to his uncle in Lamu, Habib Ali, who practised traditional medicine and was a successful religious teacher. Habib Salih recovered his health and, having shown an aptitude for religion and medicine, was adopted by his uncle. From 1885 he began to teach and dispense in his own right.

Habib Salih was greatly influenced by his fellow Hadrahmi, the poet and scholar Habib Ali al-Habshi, who encouraged music

and chanting in the mosques, and who favoured dancing as a form of religious expression.

This shocked Lamu's conservative Muslim elders, who followed a more puritanical form of Islam and generally disapproved of Hadrami sharifs and of their tendencies towards Sufi mysticism. The puritans especially disliked the playing of tambourines and drums inside their mosques. But Habib Salih's teachings were very popular with the ordinary people of Lamu, who had always enjoyed a strong tradition of poetry, singing and dancing. So he had many enthusiastic pupils.

The story has it that Lamu's Muslim leadership eventually expelled him from the town, but that luckily a friend of his, Mwenye Mansab, allowed him the use of a sandy patch of ground on the outskirts of the town, where coconut tappers plied their trade. Here Habib Salih continued to teach from a small hut, which he aptly called the 'House of Dust'.

His school and his teachings became so well known that, with

further support from his benefactor, Mwenye Mansab, and from other well-wishers, he was able to build a large mosque with ample room for all his students to sleep and to study. This he called the Ribat al-Riyadha or 'College of the Sacred Meadows'.

Riyadha is the Arabic word for meadow, but as the Prophet Mohammed in one of his sayings (*Hadiith*) stated that "If you pass by the meadows of the Garden, graze from them", the word has also come to mean a place of learning.

The resulting religious academy, which opened its doors in 1901, became hugely influential in East Africa and was renowned for its liberal traditions. For instance, much of the instruction was in Swahili, and not in Arabic, and its pupils were encouraged to debate freely on all manner of topics. Music and dance, too, were given a prominent place on the curriculum.

Habib Salih inaugurated Lamu's present musical recitation of *Maulidi* prayers in 1909, when verses composed by Habib Ali al-Habshi were first performed inside the Riyadha Mosque to the accompaniment of tambourines and drums.



These verses, known as *Dura Mandhuma* or the 'String of Pearls', tell the story of the Prophet's life, while also charting the lives of some of the famous teachers and holy men whose exemplary conduct serves as a model for how a Muslim life should be led. It is a very long poem, taking two or three hours to complete, and is punctuated at regular intervals with praises to the Prophet. But

it can be recited more simply in a shortened version.

The *Dura Mandhuma* replaced the more commonly used *Maulidi* prayers known as the *Barzanji*. Nowadays the recitations are first rehearsed in homes and at other mosques, in a gradual build-up to the final Thursday, when the full-length version is performed at the Riyadha Mosque.

Only the men chant, crowded into the mosque or — when there is no more room — outside, sitting against the walls. They sway and gesticulate in their religious fervour, reaching an almost trance-like state as they follow the words and movements of their leaders.

The women, hundreds of black-veiled forms, cluster quietly in the square in front of the mosque to listen to their menfolk singing the Prophet's praises, which they go on doing late into the night. Mosque officials keep the children in order with plaited coconut switches, and make sure that the groups of women are kept well apart from the men.

In the late evening, before the *Maulidi* recitation, there is an *ngoma*. Against a deafening background of drumming, the various traditional performances take

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Donkey racing is a popular feature of the Lamu Maulidi's secular entertainments.



In the display of swordsmanship preceding the Maulidi recitations, walking sticks — now used in place of swords — are raised (at left) and lowered (right) in stately unison by the row of chosen participants with a slow, rhythmic deliberation and to the accompaniment of chanting.

place simultaneously on the open ground outside the mosque. The performers are all men. There is stick 'dancing' from Siu and Ndau, a stately affair whereby elderly gentlemen, standing in a row, slowly raise and lower their walking sticks as directed by their leader who stands in front of them.

More spectacular and lively is the traditional Swahili *kirumbizi*, which is a display of swordsmanship. Here individuals come out into the centre of the circle and, brandishing and twirling their swords, challenge one another in mock combat. Apparently this is sometimes done in order to resolve a grievance or to release some pent-up emotion, but it is enacted in a most gentlemanly way as each takes his turn.

The Swahili men are pictures of dignity in their formal dress: a long white *kanzu*, sometimes with a dark jacket or colourful shawl thrown over one shoulder, and on their heads an embroidered cap (*kofia*). The small boys are eager to join in, and the women stand pressed against the ropes separating the performers, or occupy the roofs and balconies of adjacent buildings so as to get a bird's-eye view. The men practise every

evening during the week leading up to the Thursday finale, so there are opportunities aplenty to watch them perform in less crowded circumstances.

As part of the daytime secular festivities, donkey races, a dhow race, soccer matches and swimming competitions are organised. Most of these activities take place along the waterfront, and all the people of Lamu turn out to watch and to parade in their finery and greet their friends. If the donkeys misbehave on the starting line, or fail to respond to the commands of their riders, or if it becomes difficult to tell dhows that are in the race from the scores of other boats that are simply carrying spectators and following the event, no one minds in the least, as this is all part of the fun.

The young men get so worked up that they often throw one another fully clad into the water. Groups of youths pick their victim and carry him struggling to the waterfront before tossing him over the edge, much to the enjoyment of the spectators. (This may be part of an established tradition, since historians record that during *Siku Kuu* or Swahili New Year it was customary to throw people

into the sea. On enquiring about this, however, I was told that it was simply a show of high spirits and that the Swahili New Year is no longer the important festival it once was).

On the Friday, after the mid-day sermon at the mosque, there is a religious procession known as a *zefe*. This starts at the grave of Habib Salih, who died in 1935, and then makes its way along the waterfront, ending at the Riyadhha Mosque. Again, this involves men and youths. Separate groups in the procession represent different mosques, islands, towns and regions. Each group carries its own banners complete with inscriptions and designs and each has its own musicians and dancers. They proceed very slowly, stopping every few minutes to perform to the admiring crowds.

Later in the evening Qur'anic recitations are heard, and children, both boys and girls from madrassas throughout the region, come forward to compete and be judged by a panel of teachers. Everyone turns out to support the children and to enjoy the social gathering.

This year, after the freak *El Niño* weather conditions during which Lamu was cut off for several

months and road communications, even now, have not returned to normal, there were fewer visitors than is usual. For whereas in the past the presidents of some foreign countries, along with high officials from abroad and prominent religious scholars, have flocked to Lamu at the time of the *Maulidi*, we had to rely this year on just one government minister, the mayor of Mombasa and a couple of local parliamentarians, plus the local head of the World Bank, to give the occasion its political glamour.

A Kenya Navy ship brought in extra provisions and pilgrims, but still, I was told, this year's *Maulidi* crowds were barely half their usual size. Yet despite the economic crisis in Lamu, where tourism is virtually non-existent and where both the island's mango harvest



Part of the fun: the dhow race held to coincide with this year's Lamu *Maulidi* celebrations.

and fish catches ended up getting spoiled as a result of the transportation difficulties, the townspeople rose to the occasion and welcomed all their guests in true Swahili fashion.

Lamu radiated an extraordinary feeling of spontaneous friendliness and goodwill as women and children took delight in dressing up in new clothes and people from all over the region forgot their troubles for a few days and im-

mersed themselves fully in the *Maulidi* celebrations.

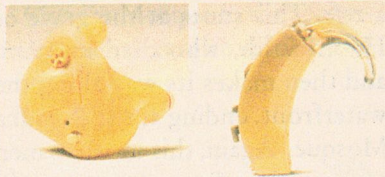
The town's narrow streets are easily decorated and lend themselves to processions and festivities in a way that the wider, motor-congested streets of most other towns simply cannot. The result is that a festive atmosphere catches on very quickly.

For the visitor, Lamu's particular charm rests in how its social life goes on neither disturbed by, nor specially contrived for, outsiders; so that during its ceremonies everybody, resident or visitor, feels inevitably and unself-consciously involved.

As a wonderful example of community participation and cultural expression, Lamu's annual *Maulidi* celebrations are an experience not to be missed. ■

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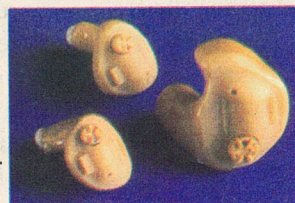
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