

## Adaptation of Swahili Architecture and Identity: *A Case Study of Lamu Island*

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### Abstract

*Cultural continuity and authenticity is of growing concern in Lamu today. This paper questions cultural identity and the resulting material culture of the Swahili people in Lamu. The exploration reveals that the cultural identity of Lamu has a history firmly rooted in hybridisation and transculturation. However, like everything that is historical, it undergoes perpetual and invariable transformations. Using Lamu Old Town, the oldest and best preserved Swahili settlement and Shela, a neighbouring village, as a case study, the study applies the theory of transculturation to explore the adaptation of Lamu architecture over time. A comparative analysis of four housing typologies demonstrates that the stone houses are characterised by variations and adjustments of an otherwise expected model; adapted to meet the dynamic functions as the town grew with irresolute precepts. The paper concludes that in the phase of a modernising Lamu, it is thus not necessary to limit cultural identity to physical forms, aesthetics, materials and textures.*

**Keywords:** Adaptation, change, constancy, Swahili architecture, transculturation.

### INTRODUCTION

The anxiety about cultural continuity and authenticity is of growing concern in Lamu today. Lamu has faced the pressure of paradigm shifts in its societal structure, leading to the divide between a nostalgic literal reuse of the past and a complete abandonment of traditions in the developments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The challenge facing Lamu architecture and in extension Swahili identity is entangled in social, economic and political debates leading to trivial progress in the advancement of discourse. For Lamu architecture, it has become predominantly problematic to ascertain the exact peculiarities, separations and dotting marks of vernacular, (or) traditional vis-a-vis modern contemporary ideologies. The categorization of Swahili identity as a hybrid society and emerging classification of its material culture as a product of hybridity is firmly rooted in social, economic and political debates. Subsequently, appropriating theory for the analysis of an authentic and distinctly characteristic Lamu architecture has increasingly eluded the conventional structure and created moot progress in this arena. The hybrid notion has static connotations which have contributed to the rising anxiety over identity, authenticity and cultural continuity in Lamu's architecture.

However, the culture of Lamu, like any other, is in a perpetual process of becoming with its material manifestation continuously transforming.

Until recently, Lamu had remained a remote inaccessible island spared from the effects of modernisation that have impacted and shaped other major towns in Kenya, a status that has shifted with its enlisting as a World Heritage Site. This has resulted in a (multi)cultural transformative setting influenced by a conjuncture of global and local forces in elements further reinforced by the development of Shela Village, a relatively new and upcoming settlement South of Lamu, as a mimic and Eurocentric refitting of Lamu Stone Town. Of due note is that Lamu has transformed, slowly and over time, and with this it has come into terms with pressures exerted from within and without its boundaries (Moughtin et al., 1995). While constant and changeable elements that define this transformation manifest themselves in the physical form, preconceptions about culture and identity have sparked the debate of an authentic Swahili architecture. In tandem with this, a struggle to retain an authenticity reduced to aesthetics, materials, forms and textures brings into question the meaning of cultural identity in

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transformative architecture.

The paper argues, first, that cultural theory, used appropriately, may advance the discourse for Swahili material culture (Hernandez, 2010). Given the complexity of this debate, it is prudent to interrogate various theoretical terms relevant to Swahili culture in order to destabilize identity categorizations. Through a reading of culture and the built environment, the paper highlights how theory provides a way to understand identity, authenticity and cultural continuity in Lamu. Subsequently, the paper demonstrates how the body of theory is useful in discussing Lamu architecture, which is loosely related to Swahili culture, and other elements that have to do with geography, economy, politics and technical aspects (Rapoport, 1969).

## THEORY

The challenge of appropriating theory for the discussion of Swahili architecture and in extension Swahili cultural identity is entangled in social and political debates. This has arisen from the preconceived notions of a people of whom their architecture is being discussed. The cultural identity of the Waswahili is entangled in the concept of hybridity whose connotations may be productive or counter-productive. To demonstrate ways in which hybridity is counter-productive, it is necessary to engage with questions within and beyond the field of architecture. The first limitation of this notion as an identity categorization is that it is perceived as being less pure because of its dual parentage. For the Waswahili, the concept of hybridity was often held against the people and their culture. It was not uncommon in colonialist discourse to find the Swahili described as a mongrel people of African and Arab descent and statements that in its disposition this “mutation” encapsulated not the best but the worst of the racially determined cultural attributes of its dual parentage (Mazrui, 2007).

Owing to its origins in racial categorization, this notion is destructive to the identity of the people in question. The political force of hybridity is contained in hegemonic politics- of a dominant group and a subordinate other (Moreiras, 2001). As a result of the existence of identity categorization rooted in colonial fixation, the Waswahili

people not only aspire for the novelty associated with foreign cultures, but in fact categorically disassociate themselves from hinterland native communities. As described by Thomas Spear, for example, the Waswahili have long stressed their putative descent from the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf (Spear, 2000). These hegemonic politics, having permeated the world of academic discourse, obstruct critical analysis. The debates surrounding the subsequent material culture-majorly language, literature and architecture-have revolved around questions of origin, identity and authenticity with the notion of a donor and recipient. In Swahili language and literature, for example, until recently, scholars have had a tendency, with regard to the interaction between Arab-Islamic and indigenous factors, to privilege the former over the latter (Mazrui, 2007). Equally, such debates and tendencies have impacted architectural history. There is a bone of contention whether Swahili stone architecture is Islamic architecture, architecture of the Arab world or architecture that is distinct and in fact contrasting other Islamic architecture which goes to show that it has African roots for some features of its design and origin (Mutonga, 2014; Spear, 2000; Ghaidan, 1975). The impact of these fixations, on the architecture of Lamu today, can be seen in the novelty associated with new styles and modern building materials which are nonconforming to building regulations. As a way of exerting permanence and conspicuous consumption, residents have tended towards modern building materials namely aluminium, glass, steel, and reinforced concrete which fail in a hot and humid coastal climate, when in fact traditional building technology of wood and coral is not only better suited but cheaper.

The second limitation of the concept of hybridity is that it is a static condition, an aspect sharply contrasted by the fact that culture in its disposition is continuously changing. Swahili architecture, as a material manifestation of a hybrid society, is perceived as static giving rise to perceptions that modern developments in Lamu are threats to cultural heritage. Subsequently, owing to such static connotations, the architecture has been monumentalised and reduced to aesthetics, forms, materials and textures that fuse in a building (Hernández et al., 2005; Hernández, 2010). The challenge with such an approach towards theory

is that it confines the discourse to aspects of banal, tangible and visible products rather than processes of formation.

Undoubtedly, racial identity categorizations are detrimental to society. In spite of these criticisms, and given their validity, the paper sustains that the concept of hybridity, rather than hybrid formation, if used appropriately, is prolific in the advancement of human societies and for this case, architectural theory. Hybridity, which has existed in many guises in previous historical moments, is useful in analysing cultural formation and its material manifestation. Given the nature of culture, of becoming, for it to be effective as an analytical tool, it ought to be dynamic. Such an approach acknowledges that cultural identities have a history; but like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation (Hall, 1994 cited in Hernández et al., 2005).

However, in consideration of the socio-political debate surrounding this term, and its misconceptions for the Swahili context, it would be useful to introduce the concept of transculturation, which lies in the same genealogy. Ortiz (1995) describes transculturation as the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures and proposed the term as an antithesis for acculturation which was widely used to describe the process of transition from one culture to another. Transculturation expresses the highly varied phenomena of extreme complex transmutations of culture (Ortiz, 1995). It is a preferable term as it encapsulates the concepts of hybridity and acculturation and breaks the boundaries therein to encompass cultural processes of acquisition or loss of cultures for interacting groups, providing the dynamics for cultural formation. As argued by Hernández, the theory of transculturation is held to overcome the hierarchical implications and means that there is mutual interaction between cultures (Hernández et al., 2005; Hernández, 2010). Here, it is useful to destabilize established cultural and identitarian categorizations of a dominant donor and a subordinate recipient. Evidence that Swahili material culture is a transcultural formation manifests in literature and language, which embraces both pure elements of Bantu folk culture and the inflowing Muslim-Oriental elements (Mazrui, 2007).

The development of Swahili architecture and settlements pattern is associated with transcultural relations facilitated by migrancy, trans-oceanic trade and globalisation (Horton, 1994). The corroboration of this is in Lamu stone town which is the oldest and best preserved Swahili settlement. Lamu evolved into three distinct parts- the enclave of Mkomani which consists of traditional Swahili houses; the bazaar street comprising of shop-and-house buildings as adjustments to the traditional houses; and the seafront veranda houses which are the latest transformations. The modes of construction and spatial planning in these three typologies utilize traditional Swahili techniques, while external features of the design- facade articulation- demonstrate cultural influences that have come together over several hundred years from Africa, Arabia, India and Europe (NMK, 2001). As a whole, the town forms a condensed and compressed urban fabric built of two-three storey Swahili stone houses in the North-South orientation and forming narrow irregular winding walkways of about 1000-2000mm width germinating from the waterfront into the town. The architecture of Lamu Stone Town is a material manifestation of the overlapping, fusion and harmonization of cultures over a long period of time. Without a doubt, culture in Lamu is dynamic- it changes coming to terms with forces exerted from within and beyond its boundaries; cultural identity is a process of becoming rather than a fixed state of being (Moughtin, 1995; Hall, 1994 as cited in Hernández et al., 2005).

Indeed the theories of hybridisation and transculturation, as continuous cultural processes influencing architecture, are not only useful to study the particularities of socio-cultural interactions between Bantu and Arab ethnic groups, but also the subsequent circumstances of European colonialism and globalisation. However, they too have their limitation. While they have evoked an endless openness on questions of home and identity, they can simultaneously put closure on specific forms of subjectivity. For the case of the Swahili, for example, the process was one of adjustment rather than assimilation. In the early developments, migrants were integrated into an existing social system through intermarriages and sponsorship systems. As demonstrated by Stephen Cairns, migrancy, for migrant and host alike, traditionally carried with it the expectation that its

flows would be controlled and managed. Migrancy was shaped by expectations that immigrants would be accommodated, and eventually settled, into the modes of living of host territories (Cairns, 2004). Although culture is transitional- from one stage to another- given the duration of such processes, there are constant and changeable elements inherent in cultural identities. Amos Rapoport has argued for this view;

*There are certain constant factors which do not change, and which may have high criticality, but the specific forms these needs take are culturally linked and changeable- and lower criticality. We may regard the 'territorial instinct', the need for identity, and "place", as constant and essential, and therefore of high criticality, while regarding its various manifestations as culturally linked (Rapoport, 1969, 1980).*

The useful analytical tool for cultural influences on the transformation of Swahili architecture is one that identifies these constant and critical elements and interprets the specific forms of subjectivity as aspects of change. Here, the study proposes to use adaptation, which is defined as the process of change to become better suited to one's environment. As has been used in film before, it combines the existing scholarship and uses previous theories to engage readers to think about the current state. The theory of adaptation recognizes that cultural formation among the Waswahili is rooted in the history of hybridity and has developed through processes of hybridisation and transculturation. At the same time, it encompasses the view that amidst these processes, there are critical, constant and changeable elements of a culture. Adaptation theory adds value to Swahili architectural studies because it recognises that buildings survive at their best when constantly refined and reshaped by their occupants (Brand, 1995 as cited by Costantini, 2017).

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted through a qualitative ethnographic approach. Primary data was collected through observation and interviews and recorded in the form of photographs, architectural drawings and notes. The field study, which was first conducted in August 2013 sought to establish how Swahili architecture has evolved through a chronological order. A subsequent field study was

conducted in March 2016 to investigate further changes to the architecture in Lamu. Secondary data, gathered through literature review of published and unpublished sources, was useful in generating historical data and developing a theoretical framework for the subject area.

The case study research method was deemed appropriate for this study because it is specific but flexible and expansive enough to adapt to the various complexities that encompass the subject of study. Lamu old town is selected because it is the oldest and best preserved Swahili settlement along the East African coast, whereas Shela village is selected because it is a pastiche manifestation of the old town. **Figure 1** shows the location of the settlements within the Island. Using comparative analysis of the built environment, the study investigates the phenomenon of cultural identity and authenticity. Due to the limitation of time and scope of the study, the selection criterion for the house typologies investigated was structured sampling. The aim of this research is to advance the discourse of Swahili architecture and document how culture and the built form is conforming to contemporary life in Lamu.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Case of Lamu Stone Town

The historic stone architecture and urban structure of Lamu are guided by local tradition, Islam, and modern influences (**Figure 2**).

During the period of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, when the East African coast saw a resurgence of building, following the advent of Omani rule in Zanzibar, as the height of Swahili Civilisation, and considering the heightened globalisation influenced by the historic transoceanic Indian trade, the developments in the prominent Swahili towns are considered modern for their time. The subsequent colonial and post-colonial periods were periods of economic depression following the flourishing of Mombasa as a major port city for the East African region. The economic marginalisation of Lamu and much of the Swahili region by the colonial and post-colonial governments has seen Lamu spared from the effects of modernisation that impacted other parts of the country over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cultural stability in Lamu is linked with economic stability. The developments of



**FIGURE 1**

Lamu Old Town, Shela Village and upcoming settlements; Uyoni and Kashmir are recent developments

**Source:** NMK 2014; Author modified 2016



**FIGURE 2**

Aerial view of Lamu Stone Town

**Source:** UrkoSanchezArchitects 2019

Lamu are marks of various historical trajectories—a rise and fall in the economic setting. This has influenced cultural stability and in turn material culture. Swahiliness, from its origins, has been a lifestyle that incorporates the novelty associated with various cultures; it takes specific forms of subjectivity based on its harmony with the society's belief system.

The question of origin and clan descent has been of utmost criticality in Swahili identity as evidenced in traditional Swahili settlements. Clusters were organised around clan systems (Horton, 1994). The enclave of Mkomani contains houses of Iranian-Arab influence; the bazaar street in Lamu is lined with shop-and-house buildings, some of which are still occupied by descendants of the early Gujarati merchants who settled here in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century; the seafront houses are most prominent in their fusion of African, Iranian, Arab, Indian and European influences (Pulver & Siravo, 1986). What has remained prevalent is the traditional practice associated with a sense of community and involvement, hierarchical order of spaces in spatial organisation, climatic response and religious order. There is a legible street hierarchy from the most historic 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings in the enclave of Mkomani to the later additions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries which are adaptations of the traditional typology. What has changed is the forms of expression, a novelty associated with foreign cultures, that manifest in the architecture's facade articulation. The houses in Mkomani are introverted two-three storey enigmas with limited fenestrations and intricately elaborate interiors that contrast the plain exteriors. Those in the bazaar street, of similar two-three storey height, front each other to create an interactive shopping street; a converse occurs on the seafront with highly extroverted houses with large fenestrations and veranda spaces facing the sea.

A further supplemental criticality inherent in culture is the territorial instinct. Basic forms of social and cultural identification—of construing sameness and difference—are ideas that are stagnant and less likely to change (Brubaker, 2011). This is evident in the analysis of Swahili literature and language. The 1963 postcolonial forces of linguistic expansion and political modernization that have seen Kenya, among other East African nations, adopt Swahili as their national language,

have made the Swahili ethnic definition (by language) obsolete. Despite these efforts, to unite an otherwise fragmented society, the Waswahili continue to disassociate themselves from migrant and hinterland communities;

*In recent years, one definition of Swahili literature after another, for example, has accepted Swahiliness in its transethnic hybrid articulation but not in the ethnic sense that native speakers of the language continue to cling to (Mazrui, 2007).*

Further illustration from the translation of English texts into Swahili literature points to this nature of territorialism, identity and construing difference.

*In spite of Ryanga's assessment that European translators of English texts into Swahili were more competent translators than their more recent African counterparts (1985, 170), for example, none of the texts rendered into Swahili by the former has been adopted into Swahili-literature courses. Does the identity of the translator matter at all? ... There may indeed be several reasons that explain why some translated texts get assimilated into Swahili literature and others do not (Mazrui, 2007).*

The reasons that explain why some European translated texts get assimilated into Swahili literature and others do not may well be shaped by questions of identity and expectations of the local community towards immigrants. This cultural identitarian notion of construing sameness and difference can be seen in the attitudes of Lamu residents towards Shela. Previously described as an underdog to Lamu town, oral tradition refers to Shela as a settlement for freed prisoners and slaves from Manda Island that were accommodated on condition that they did not build in stone but rather in traditional mud, wattle and thatch technology (Ghaidan, 1975). Over time, however, Shela seems to have undergone a transformation judging by the scale and quality of plaster carvings in some of the ruins and old Swahili stone houses present today. Having visited the region, Kisimani house is the largest, oldest and only authentic example of ancient Swahili architecture in Shela village (Figure 3).

#### Case of Shela Village

Shela village, situated south of Lamu Stone Town on the south-eastern tip of the island, is



**FIGURE 3**  
Traditional Swahili building styles in Kisimani House, Shela village  
**Source:** Author 2016

a relatively new and upcoming settlement built up of Swahili-style villas and large luxurious houses by local and foreign investors (**Figure 4**). The enlisting of Lamu as a World Heritage Site and the promotion of tourism by the national government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has resulted in the popularisation of Shela as an international tourist destination, as well as the interchangeable use of the names 'Shela' and 'Shella'. Its serene beaches, sand dunes, and tranquility distinct from the overcrowded, busy old Lamu town have resulted in increased property values. With the acquisition and reconstruction of old Swahili houses and the construction of new holiday homes at a rate faster than the residents can keep up, Shela has acquired a status of affluence where only well-to-do local residents can afford to reside.

In an effort to contend with the conservation efforts and mimic the traditional Swahili settlement, Shela is characterised by a compact and compressed urban fabric with narrow streets congruent to those of Lamu. Although similar to the traditional settlements in architectural elements, such as street widths and building materials, there are distinct significant features that reinforce its contrariness. The houses in Shela are larger and grandeur rising to a height of up to four storeys or more. In addition, the alleyways are more regular and ordered unlike those in the enclave of Mkomani. Further to, the town's legibility and progressive street development, of the seafront promenade followed by the bazaar street and subsequently the cluster settlements in Lamu old town, is lacking in Shela. Contrary to this, the plan of Shela seems not to follow any particular form, but the orientation of buildings particularly embraces a visual aesthetic

of reinforcing views from the architecture, hence strong connections towards the waterfront. The new houses in Shela are an adapted model of traditional houses. Though they embrace variations and adjustments of an accepted and unquestioned Swahili model and are similar to traditional houses in architectural elements, they are bereft of cultural identity and have not been assimilated into Swahili architecture category.

The development of Shela is not ordered by local tradition or Islam; it is driven by modern forces to capitalise on Lamu's economic position as a World Heritage Site and tourist destination (Mukami, 2014). Furthermore, a large percentage of the home-owners in Shela are not indigenous. The assimilation of these models, or lack thereof, is attributed to basic forms of social and cultural identification. As Rogers Brubaker has argued, ethnicity, nationalism and religion, are ideas that are less likely to change (Brubaker, 2004, 2011).

A comparative analysis between the layout of Lamu (**Map 1a**) and Shela (**Map 1b**) shows the differences and similarities in spatial planning. Both forms are condensed and compressed urban fabrics, with narrow winding street paths. Lamu is organised into three distinct sections while Shela forms a general cluster pattern similar to that of the Mkomani enclave.

**Figures 5a** and **5b** show the similarities between the streets of Shela and those of the enclave of Mkomani in Lamu old town. **Figures 6** and **7** are images of the interior of a Swahili house in Lamu and Shela, respectively.



**FIGURE 4**  
Aerial view of Shela village on the south-eastern tip of Lamu Island  
**Source:** Cessna 206, 2008



**MAP 1a & 1b**  
Lamu's street hierarchy (left) and clustered land use in Shela (right)  
**Source:** Lamu Museum 2014

### Adaptation of stone houses in Lamu and Shela

To interrogate the question of adaptation further, the paper takes a look at the traditional Swahili stone house against the development of the three house typologies; the shop-house building, the verandah building and the contemporary Shela house (Chart 1).

An example of an 18<sup>th</sup> century traditional stone house is the Swahili House Museum (Figure 8) which is characterised by an entrance porch- *daka*- that leads directly into a foyer- *tekani*- which faces a courtyard- *kiwanda*. The presence and size of the courtyard was determined by the size and particularly affluence of the family. From the courtyard, a set of arches leads into a series of galleries- *misanaa*- which run parallel to the width of the building. The linear order of galleries signified a hierarchical privacy gradient with the inner most room- *msanaa wa ndani*- being the master bedroom where conception, birth and death rituals were conducted. Like most traditional houses, it has two bathrooms- the first near the entrance and the second in the innermost room. The kitchen- *kidari cha meko*- is located on the rooftop to allow for the escape of smoke and heat and to prevent small children from accessing the fire and its associated hazards. The most outstanding element is the contrast between a plain white pure exterior facade and the intricate interior plaster carvings and articulation.

This feature of outward purity and minimalism is influenced by Islamic religious order and traverses other cultural aspects among the Waswahili. The house has minimal openings, a factor of cultural reinforcement and is constructed using coral limestone and lime-plaster finish for walls, cement screed for floors, coral rag reinforced with mangrove poles for slabs and roofs, and timber shutters or latticework- *msharabiya*- for windows.

The mixed house and shop function, as an adaptation of Swahili houses by the Gujerati merchants in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, similarly renders Swahili elements of introversion, hierarchical order of spaces, courtyard planning and traditional Swahili building techniques. However, these houses depict a petite spatial disposition arranged in a continuous linear planning to oblige the shopping street need and further boast larger window openings in the upper floors. Currently, these buildings are assetized as commercial expanses ranging from shops, offices, curios, and cyber cafes in the ground floor, with living quarters in the upper floors.

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries traditional houses which have been acquired by foreigners and morphed into holiday homes have transformed the upper floor into a relaxation terrace. In other cases, to supplement their household income, residents have transformed



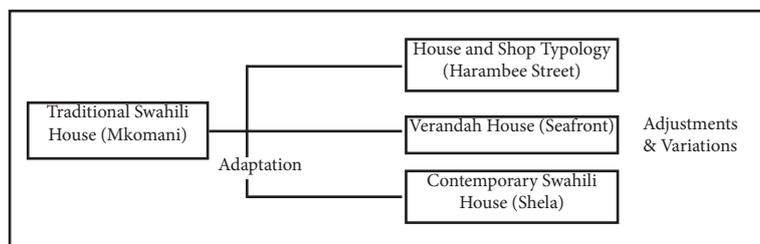
FIGURE 5  
Narrow streets and wikio in Lamu stone town (left) and Shela town (right)  
Source: Author 2016



**FIGURE 6**  
Interior planning of a traditional Swahili house, Mlangilangi House, Lamu  
**Source:** Author 2016



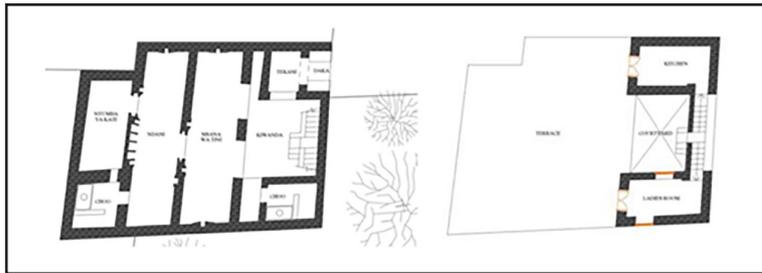
**FIGURE 7**  
Interior planning of a contemporary 'Swahili-style house' Papaya House, Shela  
**Source:** Author 2016



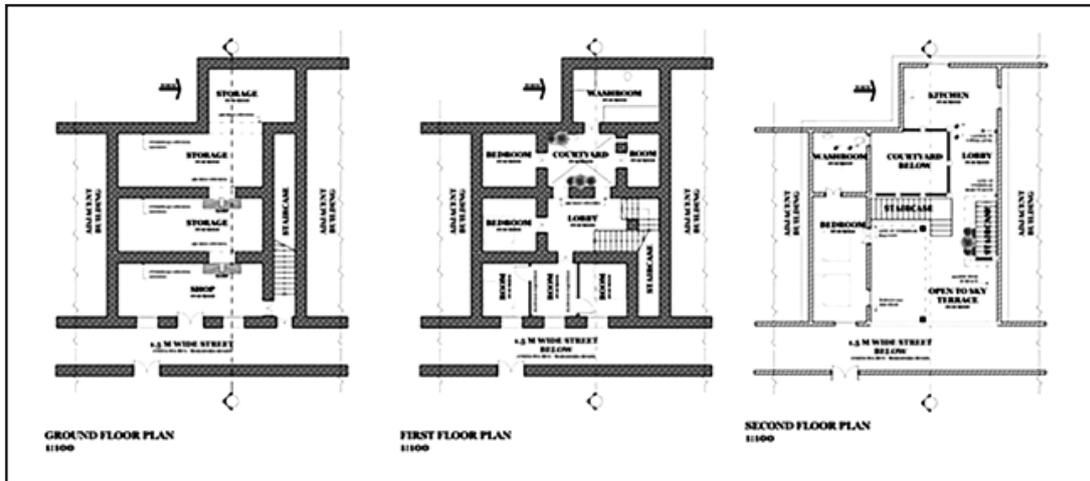
**CHART 1**  
Adaptation of stone houses in Lamu stone town and Shela Village  
**Source:** Author 2016

this upper floor into a tourist guestroom. Over time, the use of palm thatch- *makuti* in the top floor has become popular to shelter users from the daytime heat. An example of this transformation is evident in Sea GuestHouse (**Figure 9**) located on Harambee Street. In addition, the restoration and reconstruction of torn down houses by occupants has incorporated modern building materials such as tiles for floor and wall finishes, wall paint, corrugated iron sheets, and aluminium frame glass windows, most of which fail in the warm, humid and acidic environment as highlighted by an informant of the National Museums of Kenya.

The seafront houses, now dubbed verandah houses, are a further evidence of adaptation to modern life and cultural influences. They were extended upwards in the British colonial era and incorporate modern conveniences in their modes of construction. An example of the oldest of this typology is the Mwana wa Arafa previously known as Daktari wa Ng'ombe House. Built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a single storey house for a nuclear family, it is postulated to have been extended to the second storey later in the middle of that century. During the British colonial era, it was the headquarters of the town Magistrate and



**FIGURE 8**  
Spatial planning of ground and first floor, Swahili House Museum  
**Source:** Modified from Lamu Museum 2014



**FIGURE 9**  
Spatial planning of Sea Guest House on Harambee Street  
**Source:** Author 2014

finally functioned as the District Veterinary Office (Pulver & Siravo, 1986). Amidst conservation efforts in the twenty-first century, the house has since been refurbished and now functions as a restaurant, public library and conference facility on the upper floor (Figures 10a and 10b).

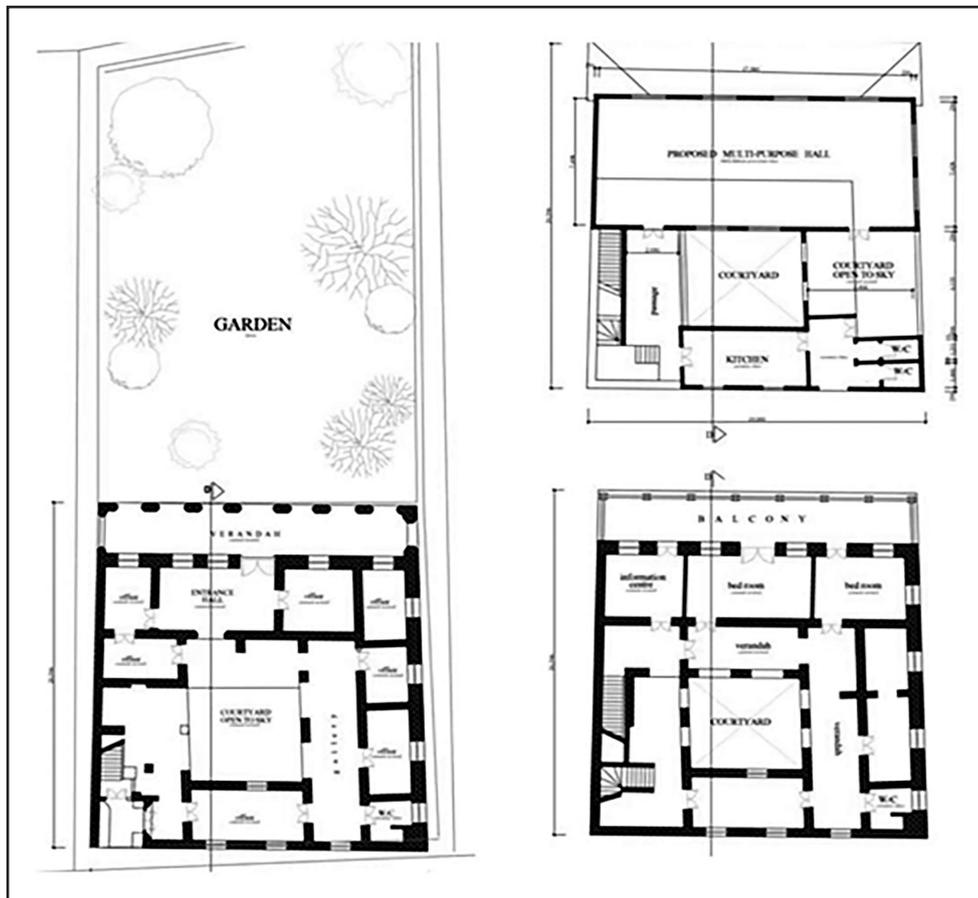
The houses in Shela are adapted to capitalise on the increasing property values arising from the enlisting of Lamu as a World Heritage site and international tourist destination. A crystal archetype ratifying this hypothesis is the Mnarani House (Figure 11), which was constructed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and recently renovated. A visit to the construction site in 2013 showed the inherent fusion and amalgamation of contemporary planning tenets with traditional Swahili building techniques and spatial ideologies within housing archetypes. Initially designed as a holiday home for the tourist community, the house which has been acquired and is currently occupied by a Danish family can be aptly construed as a Swahili-

style luxury home. Built to a three-storey height, the house is outlined by an entrance porch- *daka*- a complimentary allusion to a traditional Swahili house. The entrance leads into a typical Swahili courtyard augmented to integrate a swimming pool. The ground and upper floor is spatially organised into rooms that correlate around a central common space, a tangible and ostentatious departure from the series of galleries typical of traditional houses. On the uppermost floor, a terrace is roofed with thatch- *makuti*- popular both in Shela and Lamu houses today. The house interior is adorned with Swahili plaster carvings, a characteristic feature, which among the Waswahili was linked with traditional wedding festivals- *folala wazo*- of the affluent families.

A comparative study of the four typologies (Table 1) shows similarities in form and spatial organisation to meet changing needs. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Swahili stone house, 19<sup>th</sup> century Shop-House and the 20<sup>th</sup> century verandah house



**FIGURE 10a**  
Mwana wa Arafa House showing the upward extension (left) and the verandah (right)  
**Source:** Author 2016

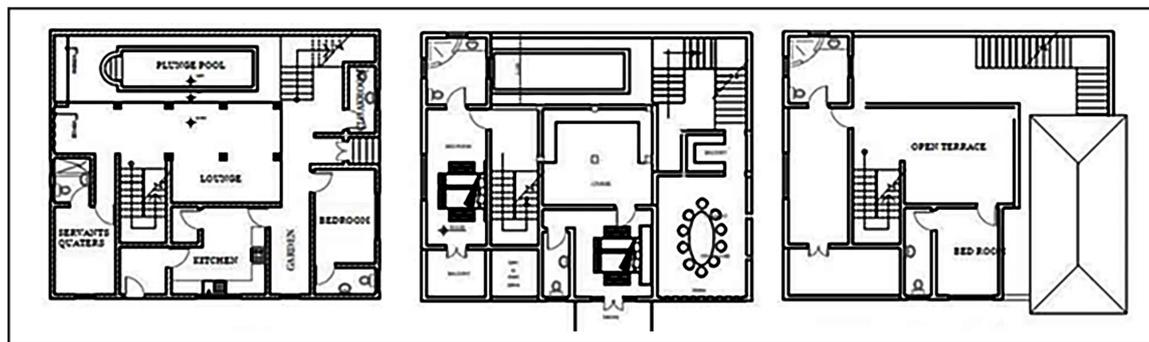


**FIGURE 10b**  
Spatial planning of Mwana wa Arafa House  
**Source:** Modified from Lamu Museum 2014

are organised in the traditional linear order of galleries which signified the Swahili concept of space. Both the Swahili stone house and Verandah house have courtyards, with the interior spatial organisation adapted to meet dynamic functions as the town grew with irresolute precepts. The 21<sup>st</sup> century house in Shela is designed as a holiday

home, incorporating modern conveniences such as a plunge pool and larger windows that open up views to the sea. The building techniques in the four houses utilise lime plaster on walls, timber beams on roofs and makuti roof covers. Coral rag which was traditionally used for walling has since been replaced by stone, giving spaces more




**FIGURE 11**

Spatial planning- ground, first and second floor, Mnarani house

Source: Lamu Museum 2016


**FIGURE 12**

Current building techniques and restoration of an old house in Lamu (2016) (left) and reconstruction of Mnarani House in Shela (2013) (right)

Source: Author 2016

used appropriately, provides a way to understand and advance the discourse on identity and authenticity in Lamu which is loosely related to Swahili culture. The cultural identity of Lamu has a history firmly rooted in hybridisation and transculturation. However, like everything that is historical, it undergoes perpetual and invariable transformation. When applied to material culture this theory results to trivial progress in the advancement of discourse. The paper sustains that the dynamism in Lamu's built environment is as a result of adaptation to a conjuncture of global and local forces. In this argument adaptation is defined as a process of change to become better suited to one's environment. This notion recognizes that cultural formation in Lamu is a continuous process and that amidst this process, there are critical, constant and changeable elements of a culture. Three main forces have remained prevalent throughout the history of Lamu- Swahili tradition, Islam and modern conveniences. Lamu architecture, a material manifestation of culture, has adapted to contemporary life through specific

forms of subjectivity.

The vernacular, either modern or traditional, is that which incorporates these three main critical forces; pastiche Swahili imitations, like those in Shela village- a European-translation of Lamu stone town, therefore, fall short and can be compared to the European-translated Swahili texts, some of which may or may not be assimilated by the Swahili people. For Lamu, cultural stability is directly linked to economic stability. In the past, the rise and fall of Lamu's economic setting have influenced cultural stability and in turn directly impacted the building styles. The development of the stone town into three distinct sections is evidence of major historical and economic developments in the history of Lamu. The developments in Shela depict capital gains over the enlisting of Lamu as a World Heritage site. Previously, Shela village has been described by the people of Lamu as an underdog to the town. However, this attitude is fast changing as Shela's property values increase and contemporary

financial doctrines and investment cultures permeate the region's socio-political landscape.

Lamu's remoteness and economic marginalisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is an ambivalent notion in the analysis of culture, identity and architecture. While there are undeveloped road networks to connect Lamu residents to the interior, tourism has been aided and facilitated by the presence of an airstrip facility. The containment of the local people within a geographical area that is both accessible and inaccessible to the effects of modernity acting in other parts of the country has resulted in cultural adaptation. Everyday life of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of foreign cultural influences has become a rhetoric territorialism and identity categorization for the people.

Following post-independence conservation efforts to promote architectural and cultural continuity, building guidelines have influenced housing design in Lamu and surrounding settlements. It is evident that design grapples with adopting material, texture and form representation of the old architecture. Undoubtedly, the meaning associated with these forms has changed, and while Lamu people appreciate their heritage, they are keen to adopt modern styles and conveniences in their daily life. In spite of the affordability and sustainability of traditional building materials, and the awareness of building guidelines, local residents persistently use modern building materials in new houses, a feature which is attributed to elements of modernity, individual assertion, conspicuous consumption and identity categorization. The greatest challenge facing Lamu houses today is the building environment; functions have since changed and old houses have stagnated in adaptation to dynamic obligations and urgencies of lighting and ventilation. In addition, the old town has become overcrowded and is grappling with challenges of sanitation.

The adaptation of traditional houses is influenced by macro and micro aspects of socio-economic changes. On a micro level, modern aspirations, fashion trends, changing tastes and preferences, the novelty associated with modernity, the time taken to build traditionally and the growing need to supplement household income have impacted the transformation of traditional stone houses.

On a macro scale population growth, increasing land values and gentrification resulting from a conjuncture of global and national government forces have influenced planning and settlement patterns in Lamu. Other upcoming developments are such as Kashmir on the east and Uyoni on the North of Old Town. These socio-cultural changes manifest themselves in the size of houses, spatial organisation, changing form and function, facade articulation, building orientation, street height and geometry, building materials and construction technology.

As the economic setting of Lamu further angles and soars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the notion of adaptation is useful in settling the anxiety of identity, continuity and cultural authenticity. Using this concept this paper recommends that stone houses of Lamu be discussed both as a product of cultural landscapes and as a process of becoming an accepted and unquestioned model which receives adjustments and variations as necessary. From that precept, meaning and identity in traditional architecture must interrogate everyday life today and strive to interpret it rather than replicate or simply conserve traditional forms. It is not necessary to limit cultural identity to physical forms, aesthetics, materials and textures, therefore further research should expand the discourse of Swahili architecture beyond the conserved boundaries. A deeper understanding of the forms and motivations of both old and new settlements can guide building ordinances to meet dynamic functions as the town grows.

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