

INDIAN OCEAN AND THE EXCHANGE OF CULTURES: THE CASE OF MOZAMBIQUE ISLAND

MARGARIDA DONAS BOTTO | maggiebotto@gmail.com
Direcção-Geral do Património Cultural (DGPC)
Lisbon, Portugal

SOFIA SALEMA | ssalema@uevora.pt
University of Évora
Department of Architecture
Évora, Portugal

Portuguese settlement in Mozambique first took place in the early years of the 16th century, after Vasco da Gama arrived at the Island of Mozambique in 1498. The Island was already inhabited, and an important trading point of the oriental coast of Africa, cradle of the rich Swahili culture. Portuguese traders and the arabian-swahili population struggled for years for the commercial dominance over the island and the coast.

In order to ensure the dominance over the Oriental Coast of Africa, the vice-King of India, D. Francisco de Almeida, is ordered to build the three fortresses of Sofala, Quiloa and Melinde. Thus protected, and also strengthened by its own complex defensive system, the island of Mozambique flourishes; the small village grows and, in 1818, becomes a town and also the capital of Mozambique until 1898.

As a town and capital by its own right, the island of Mozambique still remains, in present times, a model for the intersection of several cultures. Nonetheless, the Portuguese pattern prevails - in urban planning, in different architectonic models, in religious, military and civil buildings, in decoration and building techniques - but always strongly influenced by other cultures. The result is an eclectic architecture that dates from about 1500 to the 19th century, showing an undeniable European pattern, with the influence of Swahili and Indian models.

The island is quite small - circa three kilometers long and 400 meters wide - and is densely populated: the 1997 census revealed a population of about 15,000 people, but it is believed to have no less than 18,000 inhabitants. It is connected to the continent by a 3 km bridge built in the 1960s by the Portuguese.

Due to this demographic outburst, the island has a series of issues to solve: it has no room for agriculture, its natural resources are scarce, and the systems of basic sanitation, electric power and drinking water supply to the population are insufficient. Yet, as in most Mozambican settlements, traditional ways of life still endure, and the rich and diverse culture of the Island - result of the intersection of several influences - can be seen in numerous aspects of its everyday life. Tufo, the island's traditional dance, is still practiced in religious celebrations and other events; women use "mussiro", a white paste made from the stalk of a tree, used to smoothen and soften the skin; and traditional fishing is one of the most lasting ways to provide for families' livelihood: "dhows", the beautiful lateen-rigged sailing vessels used in all east coast of Africa, are common on the shores of Muipití (Mozambique Island's native designation). In architecture, the division between the "stone built town", and the "Macuti town" with their native houses built from wattle and daub ("pau-a-pique") and roofs covered with palm leaves, show two different realities and construction methods, with a variety of hybrid solutions in both situations.

The fusion between a western culture, transferred to the middle of the Indian ocean, and the local Swahili and native tradition, together with a wide combination of influences resulting from the strategic position of Mozambique within the route to India, give Muipití an unique atmosphere and character that is not only to be found in its architecture and material remains, but also in its customs, traditions and way of living.