

Echoes from the past

WITH AMOS KAREITHI

Identity and character}



Malindi has retained its independence from Mombasa

Echoes of its past are frequently blown by the breezes to its shores, where enchanting history is passed as monsoon trade winds gently blow the palm trees

The excitement was palpable as the African sun warmly shone on the hosts, dazzling the guests from the East whose eyes rarely left their delicate gift being offloaded on their rickety ship. Those were the days before technology had bequeathed humanity engine powered sea faring vessels. Then, their journeys were dictated by the seasons and the direction of the winds. But this did not prevent the delegation from China from accepting a giraffe that had been given by the people of Malindi as a gesture of good relations, although the African mammal would later find China's winter unbearable. Esmond Bradley Martin captures this hilarious exchange of a rare gift between the outgoing coastal residents and their visitors in his book, *Malindi, Past and Present*.

Martin retells the story of how the giraffe left Malindi in 1415 aboard one of the largest Chinese junks ever, to be subjected to a six-months journey, and ceremoniously presented to the Ming Emperor, Yung Lo. The giraffe had been secured by Cheng Ho, an eunuch sailor who was commanding a fleet of ship plying between Java, Ceylon, India and Hormuz when he happened to pass by Malindi during his fifth trip between 1417 and 1419.

"The emperor was so overwhelmed that he went to receive the animal with pomp and circumstance. All the officials of the court prostrated themselves in the presence of the giraffe and congratulated the emperor," Martin writes.

In 1414, the Chinese emperor had received another African giraffe from the King of Bengal and there was a belief among the Chinese that the animal was holy and its appearance meant that the king was favoured by the gods. The giraffe's stay in China

though dramatic, as it was pampered like a god, was short lived. It could not cope with the strange environment out of the African jungle, it was returned to its original home.

"Thus in 1917, the ambassador from Malindi who had been in charge of the giraffe during the voyage had to be given transport back" the historian explains. The giraffe is suspected to have been returned by Cheng Ho when he came back to East Africa during his famous voyage that took place between 1417 and 1419.

Throughout the ages, Malindi, like a beautiful and irresistible maiden, has continued to mesmerise suitors from far and wide, always treating them warmly, and offering rare gifts. It is this warm nature of the town and its residents that have seen some of the visitors permanently settle at its beautiful beaches, while others always return after their initial trip. Malindi's earliest reference is in Chinese Geography written by a Chinese who died in 863 AD. Its people were described as Black and their nature fierce.

According to the Chinese author, the residents of Malindi then fed on dried fish, had many wives and observed Ramadhan during the seventh moon when they did not work.

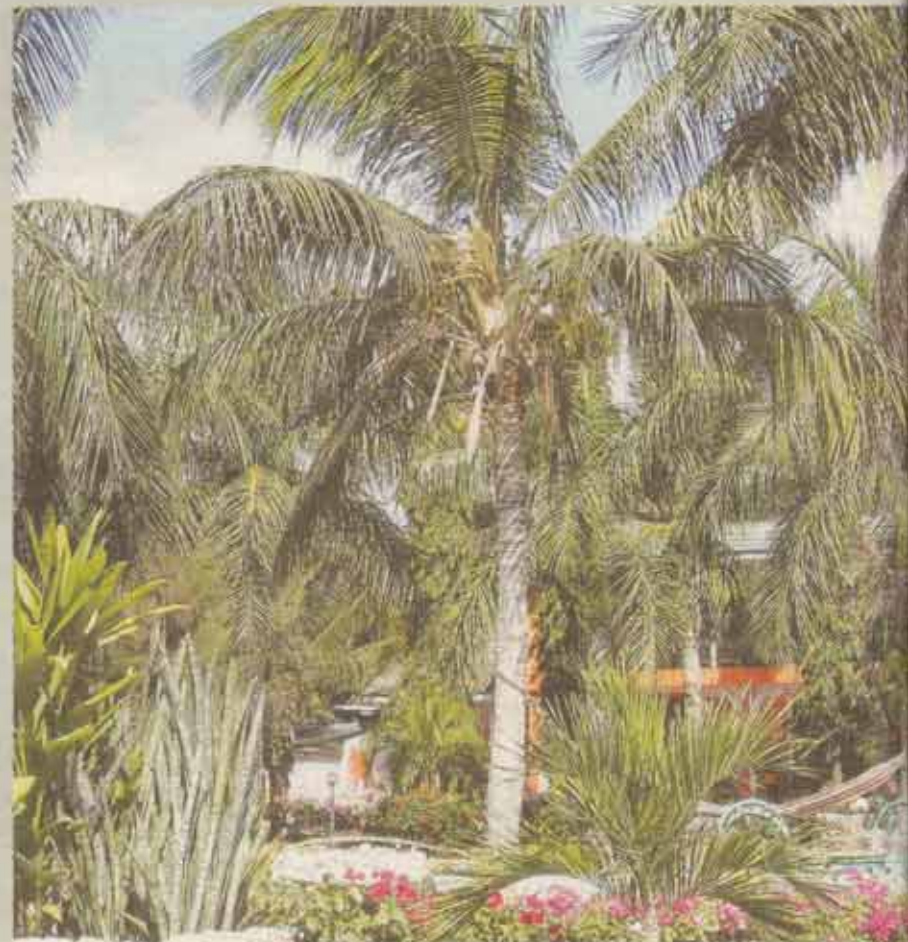
Powers to charm

Martin disputes that this reference could be of Malindi, as we know it today, but concedes it could be of a part of a Somalia coastal town. Malindi also features in the works of an Arab Geographer, Idris, who lived from 1100 to 1166, but never visited East Africa who described the town as being occupied by the Zinj people and situated at the mouth of a river with sweet water.

The Geographer claimed the residents of Malindi hunted tigers (leopards) and other ferocious animals and also mined iron that they also used for commerce.

Idris says Malindi residents had powers to charm snakes, but could provoke the reptiles to attack their enemies. Although serious doubts have been raised about Malindi's iron ore mines, archeologist Neville Chittic has proved there was iron mining on Manda Island, which is 100 miles from Malindi, dating back to 900 AD.

True to Malindi's good-natured character, when Vasco Da Gama, a Portuguese sailor who was on the run, arrived from Mombasa in April 1498, his sailors on the verge of star-



CLOCKWISE: Some of the oldest buildings in Malindi. Every now and then, the thatch has to be replaced. The alluring beauty of the coastal town, captured by this scenic view at African Pearl Hotel. A street with modern buildings shows a different face of the town. INSET: The three-wheeled tuk tuk is Malindi's main mode of transport. One of the streets leading from Vasco Da Gama Pillar. (PHOTOS: AMOS KAREITHI/STANDARD)



vation, Malindi again offered hospitality. The Portuguese were so touched by the hospitality that when they arrived in Lisbon they coined a proverb, "Amity in Malindi, strife in Mombasa."

At the time of Vasco Da Gama's

visit, Malindi was a large town with a population of 6,000 people. Four thousand people lived within the walls, comprising of the Arabs who were the rulers. Besides Chinese whose presence has been validated by considerable quantity of porcelain

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— Esmond Bradely Martin



dating back to 9th century unearthed by archeologists, Malindi had a high population of Indians who had already established business by the 15th century.

When Cabral who founded Brazil visited Malindi in 1500, he was astounded by the extensive orange plantations in the area; whose fruits he described as the tastiest in the world. At the time crops such as millet and rice were grown in abundance in Malindi, where spices such as ginger and nutmeg from India were also thriving.

The traffic of ship between Malindi and India at the time was heavy because the monsoon winds blowing between November to March facilitated easy movement. The return journey from India to Malindi was made possible by the same winds that blew from April to October.

Blessed with an ideal climate the king of Portugal decided to open a customs house at Malindi that was however abolished in 1512 after it became clear that the town did not have sufficient business to sustain it.

At the time the town however remained a key trading post for such goods as Indian cotton, wax, gum, copal ivory and opium; but its prosperity came to an end in 1593 when the headquarters of Portuguese operations was shifted from Malindi to Mombasa.

During its long history, Malindi has witnessed many upheavals, such as the attack by the dreaded Turkish

pirate Mirale Bey in 1585, who captured Faza and Pate Islands.

At one time, the pirate attacked and captured some hostages even as he tried to impose Turkish rule on the towns dominated by Portugal such as Lamu, before proceeding to Malindi. He was however chased away by Mendes De Vasconcellos in 1589.

Gazetted as a town

When 15,000 Zimba cannibals from Zambezi attacked Mombasa on March 15, 1589, and feasted on everyone in sight, this caused a melee that gave the Portuguese an opportunity to capture the pirate. Martin recounts the fate that fell on the Zimba's when they tried their luck in Malindi. "Mendes De Vasconcellos could only amass 30 Portuguese to defend the town: he was assisted by 3,000 Africans.

The Portuguese shot the cannibals at close range, while the Africans speared them from behind," Martin writes. Out of the 15,000 cannibals, only 100 escaped from Malindi although they later revenged on the

Portuguese in 1592 when they killed 200 of them in Tete, Mozambique.

The Galla warriors who conquered Gedi settlement also paid a visit to Malindi and devastated it to the state Captain Owen found it in 1823 and the German missionary Dr Ludwig Kraft in 1846. For a time it had served as a slave market after it was re-established by the Sultan of Zanzibar, but it suffered yet again after the slave market was closed in 1885.

Four hundred years after Vasco Da Gama visited Malindi, its population had declined from the original 6,000 to a paltry 1,148, and the number of Africans had shrunk to only 843; while that of Arabs stood at only 230 by 1913. By 1962, as Kenya prepared for independence, Malindi's population could still not match that of 1498, as it had only 5,818 people with the population of Africans at 2,504 almost tying with that of Arabs at 2,219.

Long before Kenya was declared a colony, Malindi was gazetted as a town in 1903, although 25 years later

Malindi lost its status as an administrative region in 1928. By this time however, it had started attracting tourists from Europe and beyond. For almost 700 years, Malindi has lived up to its billing, welcoming tourists from all over the world. This has transformed it into a fully cosmopolitan town, although the Portuguese and its Arab dominance has been replaced by Italian nationals. It is one of the few towns that has a consulate to cater for Italian nationals living in the town, although other countries are also represented in the population composition of the town.

Although the enmity between the various dynasties ruling has ended, Malindi has retained her independence from Mombasa, creating her own identity and character. Echoes of its past are frequently blown by the breezes to its shores, where its enchanting history is passed from moth to ear as monsoon trade winds gently blow the palm trees.

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Way Back in History

Allure of mouthful titles to show status

During the days when the British Empire was at its peak and real nobles were granted titles according to their service and dedication to his majesty's Government, it was not proper to address a senior Government official in Kenya like a mortal.

In a simple letter annulling a gazette notice, the governor of Kenya colony, Edward Northey broke the record of having the most titles. He introduced himself as Major General of His Majesties forces, Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, Companion of the Honourable Order of the Bath, and finally Governor of the Kenya colony.

Using slaves to rebuild Malindi

When the Omani Arabs raided Malindi in 1622, they laid it to waste and consistently harassed the town's leadership until the king had to seek help from his counterpart in Portugal.

In the letter August 25, 1622, the king stated that he had been forced to retreat from Malindi to Mombasa to escape harassment by the Omani Arabs. It took the intervention of Sultan Majid of Zanzibar to resuscitate the town by sending 150 Baluchis to supervise 1,000 slaves who were involved in tilling the land. Consequently, Malindi yielded thousands of bags of cereals that were then exported.

Slave traders that were invisible

Britain's enthusiasm almost spoilt the party for Malindi after ship Grogan that was patrolling the East Coast of Africa looking for slave traders docked at Malindi in October 1861. There they found four Arab dhows they suspected of slave trading, and fired a few canons, forcing the slave masters to abandon the fleet.

They turned their big guns on the town and fired repeatedly, severely damaging a number of buildings. The trigger-happy Britons were embarrassed when on searching the four Arab dhows they just found an African slave, whom they freed.

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