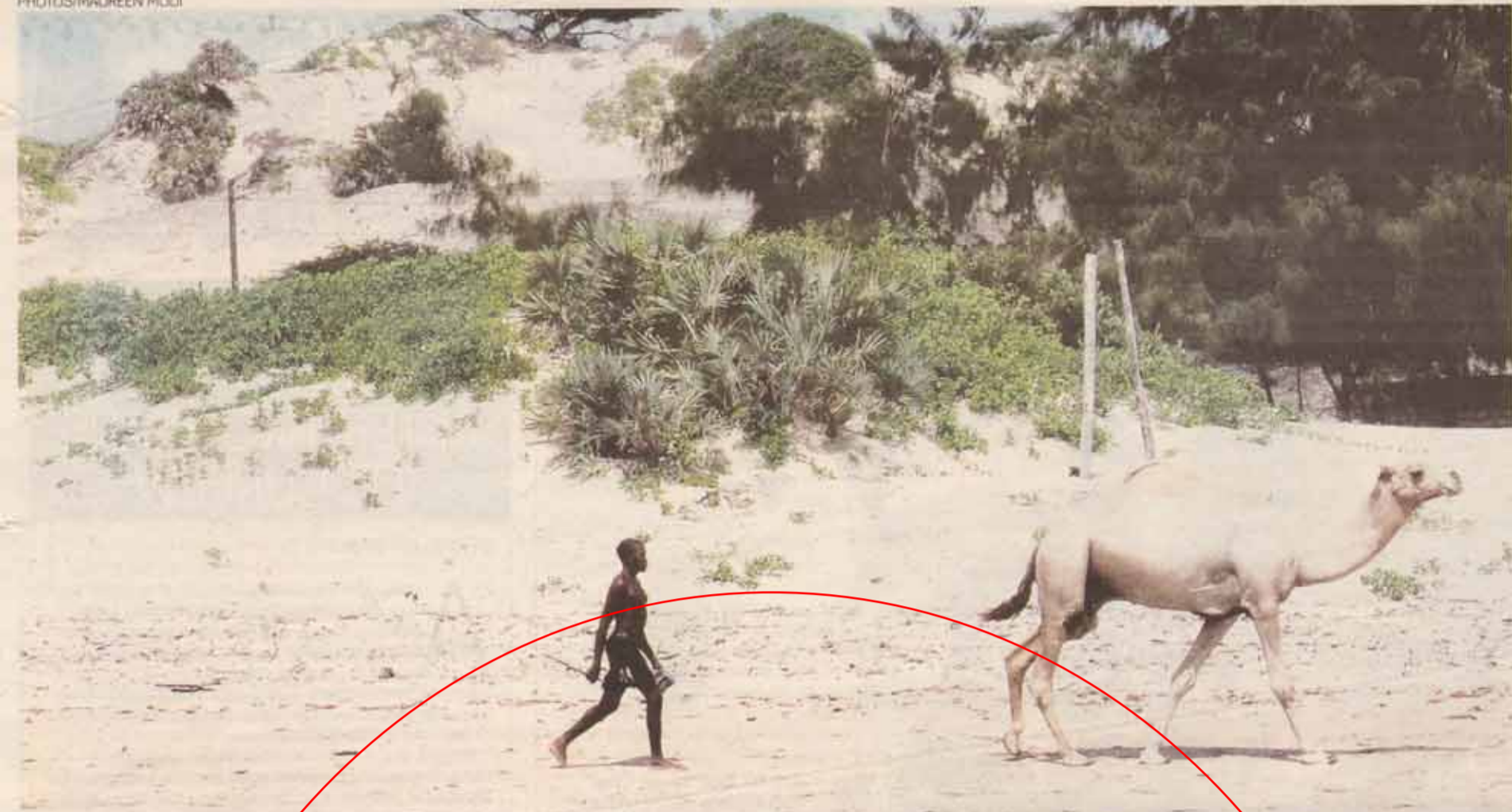
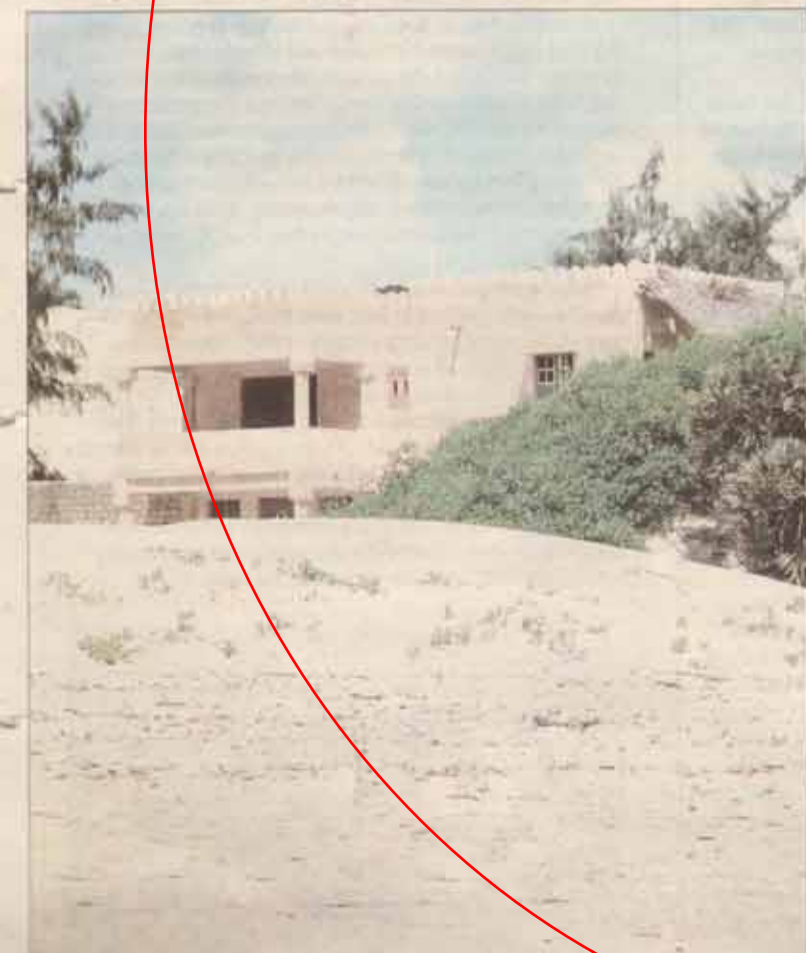


PHOTOS/MAUREEN MUDI



WATER EVERYWHERE BUT NOT A DROP TO DRINK

Maureen Mudi goes to see for herself how the land grabbing of Lamu Island's dunes is endangering the historical settlement's only source of fresh water



UNDER THREAT: In the main picture, a man with his camel walk past the sand dunes which have been grabbed by influential individuals. Above, one of the establishments along the sand dunes.

The sand dunes of Lamu situated beyond the millionaire's playground of Shela are an awesome sight to behold. The cool breeze is complimented by the clear sky, blue sea and white sands, which lend a feeling of serenity.

From a distance, hilly sandy patches are seen but one cannot fail to notice the signs of construction amongst the sand dunes.

And as attractive as the upcoming buildings may appear to some, their very existence spells doom and tell of a disaster waiting in the wings.

Underneath the sand dunes lies a natural reservoir of fresh water, probably the only lifeline for the thousands who live in the World Heritage town of Lamu.

Those who are building on these dunes are a threat to their own sustainability and that of the entire population of the island.

According to reports, the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) is reportedly compiling a list of people allocated land in a water catchment area in Lamu which will soon be made public.

Director general Omar Farah has said that Lamu Island is at risk of losing the only source of fresh water if allocations in the 982-hectare land at Shella are not nullified.

"The sand dunes are the only membrane between sea water and fresh water and they should be conserved. Should any development be allowed at the dunes Lamu will not have fresh water in less than ten years," he said.

"We are currently conducting a search and the problem of illegal allocations at Shella is even more serious than the much publicized Mau forest because the entire 982 hectares has been dished out. After the allocations are nullified, we want Shella gazetted as a catchment area so that it can be protected," he added.

Farah was speaking at a recent seminar for directors of heritage in Africa at the Whitesands Beach hotel.

Since the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) named Lamu as a world heritage site in 2001, there has been increased interest in the island internationally.

Concerning the threat of Lamu as a heritage site by the construction of the second port, Farah said NMK had been assured that there would be no construction within the island.

"But again there will be an influx of people as a result of construction of the port including those dealing with related businesses such as clearing and forwarding all of who will be craving for limited facilities within the island which should be put into consideration," he said.

Until about two decades ago the sand dunes, which cover up to 982 hectares of land, were preserved as water catchment areas but now investors have invaded the area and put up houses and commercial developments that pose a danger to the future existence of one of the oldest historical settlements on the East African coast.

In all 33 wells 10 metres deep, exist below the sand dunes and were dug during the colonial times by the British who installed a water system that has over the years served the whole of Lamu.

Experts say the sand dunes have a special system of ensuring it does not get contaminated and exposed to the salty water of the nearby ocean.

According to the National Museums of Kenya about 140 hectares of the sand dunes that amount to about 100 plots, have been acquired and declared private property which has paved the way for all the construction going on. Those allocated the land include politicians, businessmen and locals, some of whom later transfer the



QUALITY TIME Tourists relaxing at Shela Beach next to the sand dunes in Lamu

same to foreigners.

The NMK building inspector, Mohammed Mwenje says records at the lands office indicate that the grabbing of the dunes begun as early as the mid 1990's with most individuals being illegally allocated between one and two acres each.

He said, "People are using funny means to acquire the water catchment areas and in the long run, the implications will be grave if no action is taken. The dunes act as windbreakers and in cases of a tsunami, they protect and shield Shela village and the surroundings."

The official said interference with the dunes makes them change shape since they are fragile and might lead to an ecological disaster.

He said the area was in 2002 gazetted as a buffer zone and enlisted as a world heritage site.

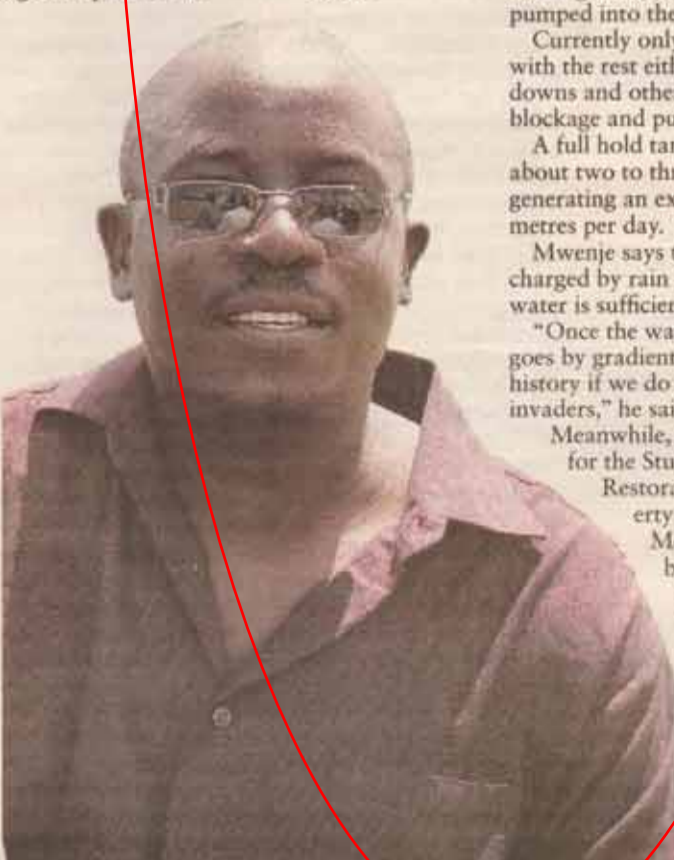
In 2004, Unesco took the government, Ministry of Lands to task over the irregular allocations of the sand dunes.

Said he, "There was a meeting of senior government officers and resolutions were agreed upon but they were never achieved."

There was an agreement that the titles of individuals be expunged and a letter was issued to that effect, revoking the titles.

It was also agreed that further construction be stopped and a defined road map was put in place.

NMK is now lobbying the government to take the issue seriously and has approached the lands ministry to see to it that the orders agreed upon are followed.



CONCERNED: National Museums of Kenya (NMK) Buildings Inspector Mohammed Mwenje.

They have also compiled a list for consideration of cancellations arguing that the area is also uncomfortable to live since one is exposed to the open sea and it is always too windy and dusty.

"I wonder how individuals can even live among the sand dunes, it is always windy and one has to keep sweeping away piles of sand as it heaps up every minute when the wind blows," said Mwenje.

Individuals who claim ownership to the land have allotment letters and leases with some selling the same to foreigners at exorbitant prices.

One acre of land is sold for as much as Sh100million

In the Kizingitini area, big chunks of land, about 100 plots, sit on the delicate land and are spread out between Shela and Kipingani, which are 12 kilometers apart.

Most of the establishments seem to have been partly submerged in the sand and with time, might be unreachable, according to Mwenje.

Said he, "With time, the buildings create barriers and most of them are within the 30metres water mark, it requires precise engineering to be able to construct durable houses here."

Just nearby, there is a fort that has huge cracks an indication that however precise the foundation is, it will not hold for long.

No mechanical process is used to ensure the water is clean as it is poured straight to a holding tank, dosed with chlorine and then pumped into the town for daily use.

Currently only 18 wells are operational with the rest either having mechanical breakdowns and other technicalities including silt blockage and pump busting.

A full hold tank can supply the town for about two to three days with all the wells generating an extraction of 6,000 cubic metres per day.

Mwenje says the wells are however recharged by rain and at any given point, the water is sufficient for supply in the town.

"Once the water is pumped to town it goes by gradient but all these might become history if we do not get assistance to stop the invaders," he said.

Meanwhile, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) director general Mounir Bouchenaki said the board is set to meet early this year to discuss and come up with suggestions of how the project will be implemented without threatening the heritage site.

"We are not saying that once an area has been gazetted as a heritage site there should be a freeze on development but there should be a way of ensuring that projects do not interfere with heritage," said Bouchenaki.

MODERN LAMU PORT COULD MAR PRISTINE CULTURE

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN

The evening call to prayer here is like a summons, for everyone on the island. As the sun dives toward the ocean, the Muslim residents stream into the mosques, little boys wearing impossibly bright white skullcaps, their mothers in diaphanous, black head-to-toe gowns. The last of the bikini-clad tourists pick themselves up from the beach, dust off the powdery sand and head back to the hotel for a drink.

Lamu has been like this for decades, a historic seafaring place where modernity has been gracefully folded into traditional culture without completely spoiling it. The snaky alleyways of the island's old town (which the United Nations recognizes as a World Heritage site), the omnipresent smells of donkey dung and sweetly rotting fruit and the crescent-sailed dhows plying the sea make the island feel like a glass museum case — one with a living culture inside.

But all that may be about to change. To the dismay of many residents and tourists, the Kenyan government is planning to build the biggest port in East Africa here. It is an ambitious, multibillion-dollar project that could transform trade in this region and knit together Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, eastern Congo and southern Sudan as never before.

Pipelines, rail lines, highways, airports, an oil refinery and extra-deep berths for 21st-century supertankers are all in the blueprints, though it is hard to imagine such infrastructure rising up along this long-neglected stretch of the Kenyan coast, dotted by crumbling ruins and impenetrable mangrove swamps.

The Chinese government, one of the most aggressive investors in Africa, is backing the project and has already begun feasibility studies. "This is real," said Chirau Ali Mwakwere, Kenya's transport minister. "We've made tremendous strides toward the realization of what you might call a dream."

Not a historian's dream, however. Lamu is one the last outposts of pure Swahili culture, a throwback to the days of cannons, slaves, spices and sultans who were a mix of Arab and African blood and who ruled the East African coast for hundreds of years.

Because it is a small island, reachable only by a short airstrip or a very bumpy road and a ferry, it has been spared the big hotels and development that have swept the port city of Mombasa, Zanzibar and other tourist hotspots in the region.

People here say they are not especial-

ly well suited for the mechanized world. There was only one car on the island until recently (the district commissioner's); now there are just 10. Most things are carried by donkeys, who plod through the alleyways or along the beach with heavy loads and blank, accommodating eyes. This is why many of Lamu's elders say they think that the port will bring more trouble than good.

"People in the street think they will get jobs," said Mohamed Athman, who leads a small marine preservation group. "What jobs? We don't have drivers or crane operators."

The biggest worry is the environment. Fishing is a lifeline for many of Lamu district's 85,000 people, and the Kenyan government does not have the greatest record of preserving its natural resources, with raw sewage dumped into Lake Victoria and countless trees chopped down in the Rift Valley. Lamu fishermen fear that the planned dredging of the port will ruin fish breeding grounds. "They will break the rocks where the fish hide," said one angler, Mohamed Shabwana. "They will destroy everything."

Omar Mzee, a former Member of Parliament from Lamu, worries about pollution from the port and possible oil spills. "This is going to be a total mess," Mr. Mzee said. "The government is thinking of the national GDP this will not benefit Lamu. It never has."

The government says that in this case, it does not have much of a choice. Kenya's growing economy desperately needs a bigger port, and Mombasa, the current one, cannot be expanded because of natural limitations on the harbour.

Ever since a Swiss firm in the 1970s identified the Lamu area as the best spot in Kenya for a new port, because it is deep and sheltered by a string of islands, the Kenyan government has been trying to raise the money. Now the geopolitics of the region seem to be working in its favour. Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi are all landlocked, with growing economies, and interested in reinvigorating the East African Community.

At the same time, southern Sudan is gearing up for independence from northern Sudan in 2011, and southern Sudan's capital, Juba, is far closer to the Kenyan coast than it is to Sudan's main port on the Red Sea. Kenyan government officials admit, when pressed, that Lamu and its traditional Muslim culture will be affected. "Of course it will change," said Mahmoud Hassan Ali, a port official. "Lifestyle will change and whatever. But if you have faith, you have faith, my friend."

-NYTimes



NATIONAL TREASURE The snaky alleyways of Lamu's old town, a World Heritage site. Kenya is planning to build the biggest port in East Africa here.