

The Swahili Carved Doors

Suitbert Elzear Komba

The famous Swahili carved doors, which are also known as Zanzibar carved doors, are important art objects of the Swahili coast which runs from Mogadishu in Somalia to adjacent places such as Madagascar, the Comoros, Zanzibar, Pemba, Bagamoyo and Lamu. However, much of the discussion in the literature on the doors lack a framework for analysis to enable the average reader as well as an art student to follow the argumentation and elucidation systematically. This paper adopts a framework for analysis of artworks conceived by Prof. Elias Jengo in his several lectures on traditional as well as contemporary art. The framework is made up of four interrelated components such as patronage, stylistic characteristics, social functions and the media. We shall use these in our analysis of the carved doors.

Let us briefly sketch how the components are closely interrelated by elaborating on their nature and scope. Patronage can be divided into two categories: institutional and personal. The former case refers to museums and galleries whereas the personal involves the person or group who commission or finance a work of art. It has been observed that many artists work under the influence of their patrons. Tingatinga painter, Michael Kapunda, who introduced the *Australian* style, for example, was shown a painting of an Australian Aboriginal painter to copy in the Tanzanian context by an Australian tourist (Gosciny. 2004, p. 134). Much of the ancient Egyptian art, like the famous Sphinx, according to Stockstad (2010, p. 15), was designed following the conventions of Egyptian priests. We see, therefore, that patronage often has a strong impact on stylistic characteristics of an art object, especially a commissioned one. And style depends on the function of the art object produced whereas the medium is closely related to the choice the patron makes when placing an order to the artist. A medium can also control the type of function a work of art is intended to serve. Furthermore, a medium used in making a work of art may reflect the social status of the patron, as we shall see elsewhere in the discussion that follows. Therefore, when art historians write about client-driven art, we should remember that they have the power of the patronage in mind.

Patronage

The coming of carved doors to the East African coast can be traced to the sixteenth century in Kilwa but the art of door carving reached its zenith in the nineteenth century during the period of Seyyid Barghash (1870 to 88) when he took over as the Sultan of Zanzibar. He imported carvers from Arabia and India to come to Zanzibar to make the doors for his palaces, one of which is the *Beit-el-Ajaib* (House of Wonders) that was constructed in 1883. Unlike his predecessors, Barghash was well travelled and he lived in Bombay in exile in 1860 where he saw how the wealthy British Raj lived in their palaces, something that made him more aesthetically progressive than the other sultans before him. He also imported architects from outside to design his palaces in Zanzibar. The rich Indian and Omani Arab merchants were influenced by the tastes of the sultan on the use of carved doors on their homes as it is evident today in the Stone town, Zanzibar. They became important patrons of the carvers that created the doors wherever they lived in the East African coast. Bagamoyo provides a good example of a settlement that attracted wealthy traders who

were involved in the slave trade. Their imposing buildings, which have changed hands over the years, are still adorned by these carved doors.

On Tanzania mainland, the colonial government's patronage on the carved doors can be seen in buildings such as the entrance door to the first National Museum building (formerly King George V Museum built in 1939) made in mid-eighteenth century, according to Msemwa (2005), the High Court and the State House main doors. Popular patronage is in a form of collecting small models of carved doors sold in most curio shops mainly in Zanzibar Stone town.

To see the relationship between the economic status of a patron and the type of a carved door he owns, we must visit areas such as Ng'ambo in the Zanzibar municipality, where the majority of homes hardly have decent carved doors in that most inhabitants of the area are economically disadvantaged. This was confirmed by the British explorer, Sir Richard Burton who, according to Ballarin (2008, p. 8) observed, when he landed in Zanzibar in 1872, that each house owner tended

to choose his door according to his status. Others, such as John (1996, p. 146) also observes that the quality and size of the doors were indicative of the social status of the owner. A Zanzibari scholar, Abdul Sherif (2008, p.76) also confirms that doors were the only external means of expressing to the outside world individual taste, affluence or social position. It is apparent that patronage has had a significant effect on the making of the Swahili carved doors during the Sultanate era.

Stylistic Characteristics

It is commonly accepted that the styles of the carved doors of the Swahili coast are categorised as Arab (or Omani), Zanzibar (or Swahili), Lamu, Siyu (in the Lamu archipelago) and Indian (or Gujarati), (ibid., p. 8). The dominant motif on the Omani (Arab) style doors is the chain, which is variously interpreted as representing security whereas others connect it with the slave traders or enslaving of the evil spirit. Another common motif is the water flower, the lotus, which is seen in almost all styles. In the Indian style, the rosette and the lotus may be associated with Buddhist influence. According to Stokstad (2010, p.83), among the Buddhists, the flower symbolises spiritual purity, the wholeness of creation, and cosmic harmony. It might as well have been copied from the Indian style doors since some carvers may just regard it as just an image of beauty without any knowledge of what it stood for.

The Indian style features brass spikes arranged in rows on carved doors as typical motifs which are believed to deter elephants from visits. India is awash with tame elephants which accidentally enter homes often attracted by the aroma of their favourite dishes such as water melons and bananas. The spikes, while part of the composition, are supposed to reduce their unwelcome visits.

Stylised fish symbols in low relief surrounded by delicate floral scrolls bearing large palmettes are common in most door styles as are the Koranic and Arabic inscriptions in the middle on the lintel. The original owners probably suggested such motifs to be included as part of the composition of the door design. However, currently the carpenters who carve the doors tend to give their own interpretations of the motifs, linking them to the environment in which they live.

Social functions

Apart from belief that they protected people and property in the homes, the carved doors also serve aesthetic functions as they present a very old artistic tradition with its roots in the dhow trade of the Indian Ocean dating back to early the Middle Ages. As art objects, the doors say quite much about the social status of their original as well as current owners. As channels of communication, the Koranic and Arabic inscriptions on the doors delivered a variety of messages to passersby. Even Christian churches at Mbwani used Arabic inscriptions on their carved doors to convey messages of faith to their believers and non-believers alike (Sheriff, 2008, p.79).

As a kind of symbolic art, the carved door motifs inform us about the cultural background of the owners. The lotus flower usually known as the white water lily, for example, has religious connotations that are significant to Buddhist followers. The fish motif does not only tell us about the economic activities of the majority of Zanzibaris but also presents a symbolic meaning to other cultures. The brass spikes on the Indian (Gujarati) door style, apart serving the purpose of deterring tame elephants from forcing their entry into for their favourite dishes such as bananas and water melons, as already mentioned, also served as a defence mechanism in war. Originally, during family vendettas and wars which involved soldiers riding on elephant backs, the spikes served as defence mechanisms. Similarly, the heavy door shutters made of teak wood served the same defence purpose.

As part of the Swahili material culture, the doors constitute a unique cultural heritage to be developed and preserved. It is heartening to see that many Zanzibar visual artists have adopted the carved doors as a dominant content in most of their artworks. This is one way of promoting this old Swahili coastal art, which is increasingly catching the attention of international organisations. In this regard, the efforts made by the Alliance Française, the National Museums of Kenya (Fort Jesus Museum, Mombasa) and the Institute of Research for Development, Sweden, in 2008 (*Habari: Information on Tanzania*, 1 2008) of exhibiting carved doors from Eastern coastal lands, are commendable. This shows how

this old art form can be revived and promoted for the benefit of the whole world.

Media

The carvers that made the doors were the same people who were involved in dhow building. As such, the same wood was used in both occupations although importation of teak wood from the famous forests of India was also common, especially in the carving of doors for the wealthy. Teak was used because of its termite and weather resistance. Here again, the media for door carving was greatly influenced by the social status of the door owners. Moreover, the carved doors and their stylistic characteristics had a bearing on the media. The hardwood used was amenable to the carving of complex and sensitive designs one sees on the doors. But those who could not afford the luxury of imported wood used locally available types, as Sheriff (2008) writes, "While door carving is expensive and an art for the elite, some form of carving is present in the simplest doors in fishing villages all along the coast, such as Nungwi, one of the major dhow building centres in Zanzibar" (p.76). Most of such doors use local woods from trees such as mango and jackfruit, which the majority of the people can access, whether affluent or poor. The doors are simpler in the sense that their shutters are normally left plain without decorations.

Conclusion

The article has attempted to apply the framework for analysis developed and used by Prof. Elias Jengo in his lectures to analyse Swahili carved doors as works of art. This approach has not been used before in discussions on the art-endowed doors. As we have seen in the foregoing discussion, the Swahili carved doors have proven to be amenable to this type of framework for analysis. The framework components are so interlinked that one cannot focus on any one of them separately without making reference to the other. The components influence each other and they ultimately give us the true role of art in society.

We have noted, for example, the role of the patrons in commissioning carvers to create doors as a way of enhancing their own prestige, seeking an

aura of power and importance by association. The reader has also been reminded that style in art, in general, and carved doors, in particular, is often impacted by influences from patrons, especially in commissioned artworks. The link between style, function and the medium in the carving of Swahili doors has also been pointed out to show that some of the motifs such as the brass spikes served as aesthetic objects as well as defence tools for the owners. The medium also revealed the social status of the patron as some of them had to import hard wood such as teak from abroad. The trend now is to use available local timber, but even then, some of the most expensive local wood such as *mninga*, *mvule* and *mkongo* can only be afforded by the well-to-do patrons.

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Suitbert Elzear Komba Sanaa Taasisi
ya na Utamaduni Bagamoyo (TaSUBa)
email: suitbertkomba@hotmail.com

