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4 Days for the Prophet

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Kenya's Maulidi Festival Celebrates the Birth of Muhammad.

People who live in Kenya's Lamu archipelago wait all year for Maulidi, the celebration they hold in commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth. Thousands of their relatives and friends, from East Africa and abroad, descend on the tiny town of Lamu to celebrate for four days during Rabbi-al-Awwal, the month in which the Prophet was born. Maulidi is a homecoming and a religious pilgrimage for Muslims from the coast. It is an opportunity to arrange marriages and make business deals, but most importantly, it is a time to honor the life and work of the Prophet and pay homage to local saints.

The Lamu Maulidi festival has something for everyone. Children compete in donkey races and sailing regattas, keeping the sea front bustling with spectators. Others participate in board game competitions, poetry recitations, and henna painting contests that attract crowds at the Lamu fort. Inside Lamu's mosques, men gather to hear invited lecturers speak on the teachings of the Prophet, AIDS, environmental protection, and socioeconomic development.

At home, women congregate over aromatic cooking pots filled with the delicious foods they are famous for serving: shrimp pilau, cassava with coconut sauce, curried eggplant, roasted red snapper, and mango chutney. For them, Maulidi means more mouths to feed, more beds to make, and more children to look after. It also means more laughter and extra hands to help make this year's Maulidi more magnificent than the last.

Many of the people who come to Lamu during Maulidi call themselves Swahili, a name given to them over a thousand years ago by Arabic-speaking traders, who referred to them as "people of the coast." Their cultural unity is distinguished by Swahili as their common language. Indeed, Swahili became the national language of Kenya and Tanzania in the early 1960s, when the countries won their independence from Britain.

Since then, immigrants from upcountry East Africa have further diversified the coast, making Swahili just one of the many African languages people speak there. Coastal people's ability to integrate newcomers and combine tradition with innovation has characterized the Swahili civilization for centuries. Their annual Maulidi celebration is a contemporary example of their dual propensity for continuity and change.

The Swahili are unique among Muslims in their celebration of the Prophet's birth. Most Arab nations do not officially recognize Maulidi as a legitimate Islamic holiday. In particular, the Wahhabi government of Saudi Arabia adamantly opposes celebrating the birth of Muhammad. Their objection to Maulidi has spurred much controversy on the East African coast over the past century. Yet Maulidi proponents have prevailed, and the celebration in Lamu continues.

Beloved Saleh, Lamu's patron saint

One reason for the Maulidi ceremony's resilience is that it contains core elements of the Swahili people's unique cultural identity. Most importantly, the celebration signifies a continuation of the Sufi traditions that first attracted coastal Africans to Islam.

Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, is responsible for the spread of Islam in much of the Muslim world. In the East African context, Sufi practices such as ziara (saint veneration) and dhikr (rhythmic chanting) resembled African activities such as ancestor worship and spirit exorcism. Unlike early European missionaries, who ignored obvious parallels between African and Christian religious expression, Sufi sheikhs encouraged African participation in Islamic worship by incorporating matwari (drumlike tambourines) and Swahili translations of important Arabic religious texts.

The distinctive repertoire of devotional activities that emerged from the combination of African and Islamic traditions was noted by the famous North African traveler, Ibn Battuta. While visiting the sultan of Mogadishu in 1331, Ibn Battuta took part in a graveside prayer ritual that was followed by a zefe (musical procession). These ceremonies seem to be analogous to the song parade that leads hundreds of men and boys along the Lamu seafront from the graveyard on the final day of the Maulidi festival. Like Ibn Battuta, contemporary visitors pay homage to local saints in order to receive baraka (God's blessings). For those who cannot afford to go on the great hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, the Lamu Maulidi offers similar spiritual benefits.

At the center of many Maulidi ceremonies is Lamu's patron saint, Seyyid Saleh, born Alawi or Abdallah Jamal al-Layl and known throughout the coast as "Habib Saleh" ("Beloved Saleh"). Habib Saleh is best remembered for integrating African slaves and their descendants into a social hierarchy dominated primarily by people of Arab ancestry. Some members of the coastal elite, including Habib Saleh himself, occupied the upper echelons of Swahili society by virtue of their direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Indeed, descendants of the Prophet continue to maintain an elevated religious status in East Africa, acknowledged by the honorary titles sharif, seyyid, and mwenye.

Habib Saleh rejected his inherited position in the Lamu social order and vowed to put an end to the injustices upon which it was based. After years of intensive religious training and fruitless debate among his colleagues, Habib Saleh finally moved to the edge of Lamu to live among the wagema, the men and women who worked as slaves on the island's coconut plantations. These people assisted Habib Saleh in building a small house, where he lived until his death in 1935. He named the structure Ribat ar-Riyada, ribat being a place for the practice of riyada (worship).

Today it stands in the shadow of a palatial mosque of the same name that is operated by some of Habib Saleh's relatives. Their main task is to continue the work of their ancestor through various charities such as providing financial aid to needy scholars who attend the Riyada Mosque College for Islamic training.

During the Maulidi celebration in Lamu, the grounds of the Riyada mosque become the arena in which ngoma (dance) groups perform traditional music and dances each afternoon and evening. Spectators crowd to watch the events. Of primary importance is the uta dance, which descendants of Habib Saleh's first followers perform in front of his former home. Watching the wagema perform uta, originally a prayer for rain, was one of Habib Saleh's favorite pastimes.

Respect to God for sending the Prophet

Oral tradition explains that Habib Saleh requested the wagema to perform uta in his memory at least once a year. Ironically, the dance serves as an annual reminder that the economic, social, and political disparities between the uta performers and the coastal elite have persisted in spite of the noble efforts of their beloved saint.

In sharp contrast to the ragged clothes that the uta dancers wear are the shimmering white kanzus (robes) that goma dancers don. Several groups perform this cane dance for the

Maulidi festival--each with a unique style. The goma from Siyu village on Pate Island is a slow, meditative dance that requires stamina and self-discipline. The goma from Kiunga on the Kenya mainland is a quick, upbeat dance that highlights dexterity and precision. Spectators circulate through the large performance area, inspecting each dance group one by one. They pay respect to their favorite dancers by tucking Kenyan shilling notes into their embroidered kofias (hats) and crowding around the group they like best. The group that has attracted the most spectators toward the end of the evening is deemed the winner.

During the colonial era, the Lamu district officer had the privilege of awarding the leader of the winning group a prize. In those days, ngoma competitions reflected much fiercer village rivalries than they do now. Most dancers today say they participate in the annual Maulidi celebration to preserve an important religious tradition that was started by Habib Saleh over a century ago. First and foremost, Maulidi is the best way the Swahili people know in which to pay their respect to God for sending the Prophet Muhammad.

In addition to the four-day Maulidi festival, each mosque in Lamu chooses a day during the month of Rabbi-al-Awwal to celebrate Muhammad's birth. There are several different kinds of Maulidi praise poems that worshipers recite on these occasions. A favorite in Lamu is a poem composed by an influential Arab scholar named al-Habshi, who often sent religious verses to Habib Saleh from southern Arabia (Yemen) with instructions on how to recite them. These texts challenged coastal Muslims who could not read Arabic to memorize the verses orally and recite them by heart.

Muslim leaders introduced Swahili poetry into ritual performances such as rama to facilitate new member participation. Rama is imbued with local flavor in more ways than one. It is a ritual ngoma characterized by a meditative rocking movement that incites spiritual ecstasy. By the time Habib Saleh established himself in Lamu, there were two residentially based rama groups that regularly competed against each other. Habib Saleh encouraged the development of these groups by supporting their decision to use tambourines in their performances. The controversial use of musical instruments in sacred Islamic rituals further alienated Habib Saleh and his fellow Sufis from the Muslim elite. And yet, it was the integration of indigenous African language, music, and dance that eventually attracted Africans to join Muslim communities such as the one Habib Saleh led. Remembering the objectives of these local saints, and of the Prophet who inspired them, is what the annual Maulidi celebration in Lamu is all about.

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