STYLES OF SWAHILI CARVING

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Introductory Remarks

A woodcarver since the age of fifteen, I have been a keen observer of carving patterns and motifs practiced by contemporary Swahili wood carvers. In my investigations, I discovered that carvers along the coast of East Africa do not practice a uniform style of carving, although their heritage was to a great deal influenced by Middle Eastern and Indian patterns. In Lamu, for instance, four styles of carving are applied in decorating doors and furniture. What I found astonishing, is that most contemporary Swahili wood carvers seem to be unaware of the differences in styles, especially with regard to their history and design features. Apparently, most of the patterns used by the contemporary wood carvers of the three prominent Swahili towns under discussion (Zanzibar, Mombasa, Lamu) are directly copied from doors that were made between 1700-1930. Most of these doors are known to have been introduced to the East African littoral by groups who settled in the region at different periods.

Distinguishing the different styles of Swahili carving may sometimes prove very difficult, especially to a person who does not possess carving skills. Swahili carving styles cannot be compared to ornaments like Egyptian, Moorish, Gothic or Islamic, as these ornaments are richer in decorative elements and distinctive in their design composition. Moreover, these decorative arts can easily be identified because of certain unchanging features. Swahili carving is very diverse and consists of many different styles with specific functions and forms that have been gradually blended by centuries of ethnic co-existence on the coast.

Fig 1: Different Swahili carving styles.
Over the years, Swahili art has come to be regarded as a branch of Islamic art, which uses Arabesque techniques to embellish wood, stone and plaster. Geometric designs, as well as floral patterns and leaf abstracts are the main elements in the decoration of all kinds of surfaces and items. As time went on, and with booming trade, especially during the 19th century, wood carving has emerged as symbolic within Swahili art in the decoration of doors and other domestic items. It became fashionable to fit every elegant building with a carved door, as already observed by Richard Burton during his short stay in Zanzibar:

The higher the tenement, the bigger the gateway, the heavier the padlock and the huger the iron studs, which nail the door of heavy timber, the greater the owner's dignity. (Burton 1872:87)

With soaring demand for carved doors, foreign wood carvers and carpenters were brought in. The new artisans, particularly those from India, came with their own carving styles and techniques as we shall see later.

Carving terminologies for different styles have not been recorded, and have disappeared subsequently. As a result contemporary wood carvers have been forced to adopt their own personalised and ambiguous names for the different styles practised on the coast of East Africa. Apparently, the usage of these names is very much confined to one place and differs from one town to another, thus rendering a confusing situation. In a town like Lamu, which has got many carving workshops, one will notice that in each workshop styles and patterns are named differently. Sometimes styles do not carry names at all.

Names also differ regionally. In Zanzibar, for instance, chip carving (geometric) is known by the name of dama, while on the north coast of Kenya, and Mombasa, it is identified by the name of bajun. I have also noticed, especially in Lamu, that if a new pattern is carved on a door, the building where the door will be fitted, shall carry the name of the new pattern. Hence, the design holi practised in the Skanda Workshop was originally used in a door carved in 1971 and installed in the Lamu Social Hall. Thus the name holi came to adopted.\(^1\)

Carving as a trade flourished during the 19th century, but then dwindled for several reasons. Important ones are: the abolition of the slave trade, the two World Wars, change of patterns of trade, the take over of the East African Coast by British and German colonial powers. Half a century had elapsed when the carving trade took a new life when master carvers like Abdalla Skanda and Ali Swabu (both from Lamu) transformed Swahili carving by applying traditional door carving skills to furniture. As a result, Lamuans who had acquired enough skills opened wood carving workshops in major towns of the East African coast specialising mainly in furniture making.\(^2\)

Today Swahili carving is not a trade confined to the Swahili only. With the influx of upcountry people to the coast, carving, which was once a privileged activity of the Swahili, is now open to all people. It is not surprising, therefore, to see carving styles which contain

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1 All sorts of Omani door carving patterns, are known by the name of Kisutu, a name given to a famous kanga in 1900-1930

2 Notable towns are Malindi, Mombasa, Tanga and Dar es Salaam
design compositions or motifs not conforming to conservative Swahili taste. After many years of copying and modifying, many wood carvers have changed the original stylistic patterns. Some of the styles are seen to contain new *vijani*, *nyoka* or *maua* ornamental elements, that do not belong to the pattern composition. Furthermore, there are evident cases of carving patterns being changed by omitting important elements or motifs within the patterns. This has led to the development of extraordinary carving styles. The topic of this essay is to present the various carving styles which form the basis 'Swahili carving', and to trace the origins of some of these styles. In addition, I will explore the present state of these styles, and how contemporary Swahili wood carvers manipulate old carving patterns, mainly from existing 18th century samples, and transfer them to new projects. Admirers of African art will notice that Swahili carving does not in any way resemble to what some people may refer to as 'genuine African art'. Apparently, this art is very symbolic in character representing proverbs, allegories, legends and myths. Good example are Benin art in West Africa and the recent Makonde art in Tanzania and Mozambique. Swahili art has borrowed many of its design and practical concepts from different civilizations. Pronounced are Islamic and Indian artistic influences. Thus Swahili ornament has become a 'cocktail' of different styles, brought together by the many people, who came to settle in this region for more than a thousand years. In terms of design, Swahili carving consists of abstracts of floral and geometrical patterns normally carved in relief. Since Swahili civilization is very much influenced by an Islamic heritage, its art does not contain motifs of human figures or sculpture, as this is not encouraged in Islam. However, in certain cases some Swahilized styles have emerged to contain such motifs. These were basically influenced by doors commissioned or executed by Hindu Gujeratis.

A) Early Styles

1) Bajuni Style

Bajuni style is the oldest style of carving, dating back to the 11th century. Bajuni style is another form of chip carving, commonly practised along the Swahili coast, and mainly by the northern branch of the Swahili (Bajuni). Historians differ as to the origin of this style, but it could be connected to the migration period, when the Bantu groups remaining in the Shungwaya area (present day Lamu District) introduced this form of carving and prominently used it in the early Islamic settlements. Besides being common in the Lamu Archipelago, the style is also prevalent among Bantu people who settled in the central and southern regions of Africa (Makonde, Mijikenda, Nyamwezi etc).

The Bajuni style [Fig 2] involves chipping out parts of wood to create circles and straight lines intersecting to form geometric designs. Although it is called Bajuni, this does not mean that the style was invented by this ethnic group. It is so called, because of its extensive application in the Bajuni towns, in particular Siu, a town famous for its expertise in production.

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3 This term, which refer to chip carving, was first applied by Lamu wood carvers, probably starting in the period of Mohamed Kijumwa, the great Lamu wood carver. Generally, the Waamu people consider all the people who come from the Bajuni Islands as Bajuni. Apparently, the Wapate and Wasu would consider themselves ethnically different from the rest of their compatriots.
of elaborate hand crafts including weapons. Apart from the Lamu Archipelago, this style can also be found in other Swahili towns. From an inspection of existing carving works in the coastal area, one can conclude that chip style or Bajuni was regionally practised. However, significant differences can be seen in motifs. The Mijikenda vigango\textsuperscript{4} are a good example to support the argument. The Bajuni applied this style in doors, mbuzi (coconut graters), shanuo (combs) and sometimes to decorate the mtepe (dhow)s along the bow and stern.

Fig 2: Various Bajuni patterns

\textsuperscript{4} Long pieces of wood carved abstracting human figure and with geometrical engravings. The pieces represent the dead in the Mijikenda family, or in the community, and are placed in isolated sites known as kaya.
It is also believed that, geometric or chip carving is a form of decoration which goes back to pre-historical times. Archaeological discoveries in many parts of the world show that the first human attempts in artistic decoration came in the form of chip style. Probably, at this time human capability could not go beyond this, so as to attain floral or figure carving. Early kingdoms like Egypt, practised this form of ornament beside their own styles, in the decoration of walls and furniture. Later, the Byzantines and the Muslims enriched the geometrical designs with more beauty by including floral elements in the design composition.

During Omani rule in East Africa, the ‘Bajuni style’ was used in plaster work. Many residential buildings in Lamu, built in the 18th century, have interiors decorated with niches and plaster work containing geometrical patterns of different motifs (Allen 1979). The same sort of designs was also applied to the centre post of Omani floral-designed doors. Although plaster decoration can be linked to the Omani period, the designs are based on the Bajuni style. Due to its simplicity, a contemporary Swahili fundi (craftsman) prefers to use the style as an introductory exercise for new trainees. Bajuni style is a very flexible style and can be used to decorate any kind of wooden surface.

2) Siu Style

On Pate Island in the Lamu Archipelago, there is a small village by the name of Siu, renowned before and after the Portuguese period, for leather and wood work, and iron-mongery. This town was part of a chain of early Swahili settlements. Today, most of the old buildings that formed the original town are in ruins. The Siu style, roughly datable to the 14th century, is different from the rest of Swahili styles, both in design and appearance. So far, the origin of this style is not clearly known, but it has been suggested, that the style is likely to have come from India, specifically Kashmir, where the art of staining carvings and joinery works with different colours is still popular. Another theory, that could be put forward, is that the Siu style may be part of Islamic ornamentation styles found especially in the Maghreb (Northwest Africa) and introduced here by early settlers and traders. Some Arabian and Indian dhows feature similar decorations, carved and painted on the stern, and it is likely that dhows played a certain role to influence the art in the trade circuit.

Siu carving style is largely found on doors believed to be the oldest among the existing carved doors along the coast. Some of these doors date to the 14th century A.D. The style consists of floral designs engraved thinly with a chisel or ‘V’ parting tool, and finished by filling the incised parts with white coral lime, mangrove and black stain. The Siu style is a very simple ornament to execute. The design consists of one unit, which is repeated to form a chain of symmetrical units (Fig 3).

Historians have suggested that the designs carved on Siu doors, may have been the same as the ones admired by Barbosa, the Portuguese writer, who visited this region, and mentioned ‘well carved’ doors (Freeman-Grenville 1962:131; Aldrick 1990:2). Siu doors have a different

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5 According to the local tradition, there used to be a community of Hindu craftsmen living in Siu. See also Brown 1988.
construction from all the other doors found along the Swahili coast. The side frames are joined with the *kizingiti cha jiu* (top frame) by a mitre bridle joint and strengthened by a lapped *taji* (lintel or crown) which is extended beyond the top frame. They do not have a centre post and the shutters are engraved thinly with circular patterns finished by staining with red, black and white colours. This kind of construction is not found in other Swahili doors, but is similar to that of Gujarati doors. Through the initiative and creativity of Bakari Kanga, a prominent Lamu wood carver, the Siu style is used in the production of souvenirs such as *masiwa* (carved horns), candle holders, trays, sign boards, *kimu cha tambi* (spaghetti squeezer), among others. Today, the Siu style, or *nakshi za vui*, as coined by Lamu wood carvers, is becoming popular in the production of souvenirs for local and tourist markets.

Fig. 3: Various Siu patterns.
3. Omani Style

In 1698, the Mazrui Arabs from Oman took over the leadership of the Swahili coast from the Portuguese and slowly started to restore and rebuild the devastated towns. With Mombasa as their base, the Mazrui revived the Indian Ocean trade that had stagnated during Portuguese
rule. Foreign artisans, with the help of cheap slave labour, brought new ideas to building construction, and changes in town planning. The ruling class, and those who were rich, added more beauty to their houses by fitting imported carved doors, preferably styled in Oman. Others commissioned local artisans to copy existing doors. Mosques and new palaces were thus built. Gradually a number of coastal towns regained their glory, including those towns like Lamu, Pate and Zanzibar which were previously opposed to Mazrui rule.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Mazrui rule was beginning to show signs of weakening, due to constant resistance from several city states, and their own internal family wranglings over succession. In 1806, Seyyid Said from the El-Busaidy lineage took over the leadership of Oman and responded to calls by Lamu, Pate and Zanzibar to extend his authority to the East African coast. Finally in 1837, he succeeded in defeating and expelling the Mazrui Arabs from Mombasa, and he moved his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar. Seyyid Said continued to develop the region. Splendid buildings were built, and the designs of carved doors [Fig 4], that were earlier introduced during Mazrui period, became increasingly varied and pronounced. Probably, this could be attributed to the involvement of Indian wood carvers, who added more pattern varieties. It is doors carved in this period which established the Omani style, which is so different from the rest of Swahili styles. The whole design is built by a chain of units which uses the *nyoka* (carves) and the *mawaridi* (rosettes) as the principal elements.

The units are repeated through mirroring and alternation to form a complete pattern (super unit). Normally, decorative elements in this ornament appear grooved in ‘V’ shape, except for flowers, fruits and seeds which are carved to almost real form. In some doors, the rosette may be replaced by a lotus flower or abstract leafy design. Common motifs, that feature in the Omani style, are the rosette, dragon or carve, lotus flower, chain, rope and palmette [Fig. 5].

Since most Omani doors do not show dates, it is difficult to establish, when the first works of this style were introduced to East Africa. Presumably, the door of the first Mandhry Mosque which was built in 1570 (cf. Strandes 1989b), today facing the old town conservation office, could be the oldest surviving door, although there is no inscription on the door to prove this argument. However, the partly-fading carving on the small panel, shows that the door was not installed, when the Mosque was rebuilt in 1830. In Zanzibar, at the back of the Museum, there is a door inscribed 1112 AH (1694) which is probably the oldest in the town. Another door is in a residential building close to N'nalalo mosque in Lamu which is dated 1211 AH (1796). Both doors are carved in Omani style and the dates coincide with the Mazrui period of rule. There are approximately 650 Omani style doors original and copied, spread in the coastal towns of East Africa, whereby Zanzibar has the biggest number followed by Lamu and Mombasa.

Although the Omani style doors constitute the largest number of carved doors in East Africa, it is unfortunate, that the modern reproduction of these doors, and the exploitation of the style as a whole, is very limited. Most wood carving workshops prefer to copy the Lamu (Kijumwa) or Ali Swabu styles of carving for decoration of doors and furniture. When I interviewed a cross section of wood carvers from Lamu, Malindi, and Mombasa, most of them answered that, Omani style is difficult to carve, not popular, and that its patterns are limited to
doors only. They prefer other Swahilised styles like Indian, Lamu and Ali Swabu styles, which they claim to be more flexible and adaptable to furniture, doors, and all sorts of tasks. In Zanzibar, the reproduction of the Omani style is still practised, but only on a small scale and it is mostly blended with the Indian style.

Fig 5: Common motifs of Omani style
4) Zanzibar (Indo-Persian) Style

The Zanzibar style is based on Indo-Persian ornaments, which are found far and wide in India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Bangladesh. This style was introduced and became fashionable in East Africa during the rule of Sultan Seyyid Barghash (1870-1888) who, at one time during his exile stay in Bombay, was attracted to this style. The Zanzibari style sometimes appears rather Gothic, although it retains distinctive features of Indo-Islamic design. This form of decorative carving is prevalent in Zanzibar, mainly in doors and, to a smaller extent, in furniture work.

After the death of Sultan Majid in 1870, Seyyid Barghash took over and brought significant changes and improvements to the island of Zanzibar. His two major projects were the Bububu railway, which ceased to function in 1929 (cf. Patience 1995:1-3), and the Beit-el-Ajab (House of Wonders). During the construction of the Beit el Ajab, which was designed by a British engineer in 1883, Sayyid Barghash commissioned Indian and local craftsmen to carve all the doors with floral designs and Quranic motives. Some doors, that enhanced the beauty of the palace, were reported to have been donated by a Kashmiri ruler during a visit to Zanzibar.

Sultan Barghash exemplified his desire for Indo-Persian carving style by furnishing the Maharubi and Baitul-Sahel palaces with imported furniture from India (now exhibited at the Palace Museum). Due to the increase in trade, that was largely dominated by Indians and Arabs, more doors and furniture of this style were made for the wealthy community. Later, this style became very famous and spread to Mombasa (Mbarak Hinawy house, Jamat Khana), but to a very limited proportion. Many of these splendid doors are still seen along the narrow streets of Zanzibar, standing approximately thirteen feet tall with their half round crowns.

The Zanzibari style differs from Gujarati style, though there is some similarity in certain decorative elements and carving techniques. This style, has the most interesting patterns and is richer in decorative elements than any Swahilised carving. The patterns appear either pierced or reliefed. Kijumwa, the legendary Lamu wood carver and artist, was inspired by this style during his frequent visits to Zanzibar, although he failed to grasp its carving techniques.

The Zanzibari style uses a free flow concept of design, with naturalistic plant motifs such as vine leaves, grapes, maple leaves, cloves and similar forms of ornamental elements. Sometimes the patterns were blended with vine, sunflower and maple abstracts with a combination of rosettes, leaves, branches, fruits all growing out from a vase [Fig 6]. There are about 50 doors of this style in the old town of Zanzibar compared to only five doors in Mombasa. In Mombasa, one of these doors was the one in the ladies house along Ndia Kuu, which was later, in the 1940s, plucked out to be sold elsewhere (Friends of Fort Jesus 1985:20). Carving Zanzibar style is a hard task which requires great skills and artistic imagination to arrive at immaculate results. In contrast to the Omani style, where each element is simply carved out in a 'V' shaped groove, the Zanzibar style requires shaping (modelling) of decorative elements to a much more realistic form. Today, the style enjoys little exploitation and recognition from Swahili wood carvers in the decoration of doors and furniture. Wood carvers from Lamu, Malindi and Mombasa do not carve the Zanzibari style, as they do not possess the essential skills in carving this artistic and complicated style.
Fig. 6: Common elements of ornament found in a Zanzibari carving pattern

Going through the narrow streets of Zanzibar old town one will not fail to be attracted by the many wonderful nineteenth century carved doors of Indo-Persian style. However, it is unfortunate that the present generation of Zanzibari wood carvers lacks artistic skills to replicate patterns which appear on these doors. A number of recently copied doors, or general carving work of this style, that I saw in the town, were carved in inferior quality. Considerable alterations are made to certain motifs, so as to simplify work. In addition, some newly carved Zanzibari style doors had centre posts and outside frames carved in Omani style motifs while the crown (the top panel) remained decorated in Zanzibari style. I asked Seif Jabir, a graduate from Mkunguni Technical School, Zanzibar, a young wood carver and proprietor of a small wood carving workshop in Michenzani, regarding the practise of combining two incompatible styles in a single project. He informed me, that the idea was conceived by one of the master
woodcarvers, and adapted by all mafundi on the island. I would suggest however, that whoever started the practice just wanted to reduce the duration of executing these otherwise time consuming doors.

5) Gujerati Style

This is another foreign carving style introduced to East Africa by Indians, who largely originated from Gujerati and Cutch in North-Western India, a region which is popular for wood carving and craft-related work. Apparently, the Gujerati style is derived from doors, that were imported or carved locally, mainly by a branch of Cutch Indians known as Luhar Wadha, who were famous carpenters and carvers (Salvadori 1983:139, also Trivedi 1961:28-37). The exact date of the first work of this style to be introduced in East Africa, is not yet recorded, but could roughly be 1860, when large numbers of Gujeratis started to build their permanent homes in East Africa. Prior to this, according to Duarte Barbosa, the Portuguese journalist, as early as the seventeenth century, a small group of Gujeratis were already trading and living in Mombasa. However, he did not specify if doors of this style were fitted into their dwelling places (Pierce 1920:120).

When Seyyid Said transferred his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar in 1833, he invited many Banyan Indians to come to trade and work on the island. The majority of these traders, were Muslims of the Khoja, Cutch, Bohra and Ithnashari sects. Due to a favourable commercial environment Indian traders settled in the major Swahili towns. Subsequently, the new immigrants, due to their wealth, brought from their homeland skilled craftsmen and builders to put up new homes fitted with doors decorated in Gujerati style [Fig 7].

Fig 7: Gujerati door detail carving pattern
The Gujarati carving style has got special features, that makes it easy to identify. The pattern is formulated by leafy foliage similar to Gothic ornament. Some houses in Zanzibar and Mombasa old town have wood work balconies decorated in this style. Generally, elements of ornaments of Gujarati style appear natural and alive. Sometimes the pattern can also include rosette, sunflower and an abstract form of a pineapple. The carving is done in high relief and occasionally pierced. Gujarati style doors form the second largest group after Omani doors. The largest number is in Zanzibar followed by Mombasa and Lamu. Owing to its beauty and free-flowing design principles, similar to that of Zanzibari style, Gujarati style could be better applied in the decoration of furniture. However, because of its complicated carving techniques the style is rarely carved or copied by modern Swahili wood carvers.

B) Contemporary Styles

1) Lamu (Kijumwa) Style

This local floral carving style came into existence as a result of carving works that were made possible through the initiatives of Ahmed Abubakar Omar Kijumwa, born in 1876 in Lamu. Kijumwa was well known as a poet, artist, calligrapher, historian, musician, and as a wood carver (Dammann 1980:1-14). According to information supplied by carving students (Abdalla Skanda and Hassan Daktai), who were trained by his son Helewa, Kijumwa did not receive any sort of training in woodwork. His skills in carving were based on trial and error. During visits to Zanzibar, where he would be invited to perform music in the Sultan's court, Kijumwa was inspired by the Indian style of carving, and when he returned to Lamu, he started to practice. From his surviving works, we can see how he gradually developed from rough low relief carvings of his early doors, to a much more improved carving. A closer examination of three doors in Lamu - the front door in Lamu Museum, the door in the former German Post office which is inscribed 1310 AH (1893/94), and a door near Qurban wholesale shop inscribed 1314 AH (1896/7) - provides a clear proof of his artistic development.

As an artist, Kijumwa created his designs and maua na majani (elements of ornaments) stimulated largely by existing Zanzibar (Indo-Persian) and Omani doors. The Lamu (Kijumwa) style could be easily identified by its carving appearance of 'V' shaped grooved curves and leaves. Other ornaments of the pattern, like rosettes, seeds and fruits are carved to almost realistic shape. Generally, the Lamu style is based on an abstraction of a known or unknown plant growing from a vase; a very common practise with Indo-Persian designs. In addition, the Kijumwa style is carved in high and low relief (bevelled) with a combination of elements of ornaments from Omani and Zanzibar styles and sometimes mixed with his own unusual motifs of a bird, a pair of compasses, mangrove seeds and a pointing hand [Fig. 8].

Kijumwa died in 1946, but he had taught his skills to his son Helewa Ahmed, who later was employed at MEOME, the current Mombasa Polytechnic, as a wood carving instructor. While at MEOME from 1951-6, Helewa trained several carving students who became instrumental in spreading his father's carving style. Today Abdalla Ali Skanda, a prominent student of Helewa and in his seventies now, owns a big workshop opened 35 years ago, which caters for training and production of carved items. Kijumwa carving patterns rose to prominence, when Skanda,
employed them in the decoration of furniture. Skanda's most prestigious project, decorated in the Kijumwa style, is the Kenya Parliament main door. Due to ease of application and execution, Lamu style has changed from a door speciality to furniture production and has spread to Mombasa, Malindi and Tanga.

![Various Lamu carving patterns](image)

**Fig. 8: Various Lamu carving patterns**

**2) Ali Swabu Style**

The Swabu carving style is the latest to be accepted in Swahili carving and enjoys a larger application than any other style on the Swahili coast. The development of this style was through the initiative of Maalim Ali Swabu, born in Siu in 1923. At the age of six he went to Lamu to attend Islamic classes at Riadha Mosque. Ali Swabu displayed his creativity and intelligence at a youthful age, when he learned to recite the whole Quran by heart and mastered the art of calligraphy. After graduating from the Madrasa (Islamic school), he attached himself to a home based fundi known as Bakari Tirimu, to learn skills in producing mapi designs, in which he proved to be the best.

He quickly mastered mapi patterns and created his own floral style carved exclusively in low relief. Ali Swabu style has special features and motifs that are rarely found in other Swahili carving styles. His style is built on the same design principles as the Lamu (Kijumwa) and Zanzibar styles. Minor differences exist in appearance and carving techniques. Different shapes of nyoka (curves) are combined with abstractions of leaves, cashewnut, mango, sunflower, pineapple and many more [Fig. 9]. According to himself, his ideas on carving designs are based...
on personal creativity without duplicating the existing carving works. But if one observes the Ali Swabu style, one is likely to discover, that most of his patterns and motifs share common design principles with *kanga* (cloth) patterns. Ali Swabu carving style contains a strong sense of artistic creativity, that has not failed to attract. Beside woodcarving, he is also renowned for making mosque models used in Maulidi celebrations and high relief floral plaster work. The Swafaa and Riadha Mosques plaster decorations in Lamu provide enough evidence to his creativity in art.

Before his death on 27th April 1995, he taught his carving and design skills to his sons, who are now operating wood carving workshops in Lamu and Mombasa. The Ali Swabu style is regarded by wood carvers as the simplest and most flexible of all styles practised on the Kenyan Coast. The Serena Hotel in Mombasa features many carving examples of Swabu's style executed by his son, Abdalla Ali Swabu. The style is now greatly applied in the production of furniture, doors and souvenirs.

![Ali Swabu carving patterns](image)

**Fig 9: Various Ali Swabu carving patterns.**

3) Mapi Style

The period in which this form of carving style developed is not clearly known. Yet from its use and from the appearance of design elements, which resemble Lamu style, it is probably a recent one. As the name suggests, this style is used to decorate the bow and the stern of the Swahili *jihazi* (dhow), a practice which is common in dhow building in the Lamu Archipelago. The original idea of decorating modern Swahili dhows with the *Mapi* decoration evolved from the old Bajuni *mtepe* dhow, where bow and stern used to be decorated with geometric designs painted in black, red and white (Prins 1965:102-103). With the changing times, the *mtepe* dhow was phased out and replaced by a modern dhow, superior both in design and
workmanship (82). It is in this new dhow that the idea of creating the Mapi ornamentation to replace the geometric decoration was conceived.

*Mapi maua na majani* (decorative elements) are the same as those found in Kijumwa and Ali Swabu styles. In fact, both founder members of these styles were instrumental in enhancing the Mapi work and, at the same time, are regarded to have created the best Mapi decorations ever to be made. The elements of ornamentation in all Mapi work are designed not to touch each other, although they appear to follow a systematic arrangement. The completed Mapi is painted in green or in blue and the engraved areas in white paint [Fig 10]. A distinctive Mapi design is made up of two parts, the *jagi* (vase) and the *mti* (main structure) of the design which are slightly separated to leave space for any unmatching motifs such as a peacock, flag, lion or crown.

Even with all its beauty and ease of execution, the Mapi style is confined to the decoration of dhows, although it could be easily applied in the decoration of furniture, doors, and other items.

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Fig 10: Detail Mapi pattern
Motifs and Ornamental Elements

One extraordinary aspect of Swahili carving is the lack of clear explanation of the meaning of various ornamental elements or motifs applied in a pattern. It appears that contemporary wood carvers copy the patterns from the existing 18th century doors blindly, without putting much curiosity unto the meaning of the various motifs found in the doors. Thus, interpretation of the various motifs which are in everyday use, has been a real problem. In all Swahili towns which are intensively engaged in wood carving, it is difficult to get people who can give convincing answers as to the interpretation of motifs. A curious researcher on Swahili carving will be forced to give his own judgement in as far as the meaning of motifs are concerned.

One of the key problems, which I experienced when I was a trainee in wood carving, is the reality of accepting that there no such thing as motifs in Swahili carving. When I attained the status of a fundi6 I thought it ridiculous to accept that a chain or palmette in an Omani style door does not have any meaning. As I put more interest on this subject, a balanced interpretation on several motifs came to the fore. Hence, cheni (chain) on the Omani door represents power, wealth and the influential position the owner possesses in society. The nyanda (palmettes) carved in the outermost frame of a door symbolises unity in the household, while the waridi (rosette) found mostly in Omani, Gujarati and Zanzibar styles proclaims happiness. The fish scales and fish themselves including the lobster motifs found at the bottom of most Omani doors represent the wealth obtained from the sea. Another version of this is plenty and fertility in the household. Although representational (three-dimensional) motifs are rarely to be found in Swahili carving, one may nevertheless discover peacocks, lions and doves mostly found in Gujarati and Zanzibar styles. These motifs were introduced by Hindu wood carvers and are linked to Hindu mythologies. Fruits of several kind remand the wonderful life in heaven. Finally, the lotus flower and flowers in general mean peace, happiness and tranquility.

Styles and Patterns

Except for Ali Swabu and Mapi, all carving styles that I have examined, have developed from the existing 17-20th century doors or furniture works. Carved doors are the symbolic material heritage of the Swahili people in the coastal towns of East Africa, particularly Zanzibar, Mombasa and Lamu. As door carving declined, as a result of low demand and the other already mentioned factors, contemporary wood carvers have discovered other uses of these styles. The patterns from the doors are copied and altered to form patterns suitable for furniture and souvenir decorations.

The names of styles I have used frequently may not be necessarily known or used by the Swahili wood carvers. This also applies to Swahilised styles like Omani, Zanzibar (Indo-Persian), and Gujarati (Indian). However, I have taken care not to deprive them of the presumed origins of some of the styles. In line with this view, I have tried to link the names

6 Craftsman, artisan or instructor. Normally this term is applied for an artisan who has demonstrated high degree of workmanship.
with the communities and places that played a major role in introducing or developing the art in this part of the world.

It should also be presumed that new undefined styles or sub-styles are likely to appear because of massive alterations done to the old patterns for the sake of simplicity in carving. Moreover, the participation of non-Swahili wood carvers in carving will also result in the introduction of new motifs and styles as already seen in recent works. A close look at many doors or furniture, which have been carved lately, reveals a new character of patterns which is not compatible with the original Swahili styles. This has happened, because motifs from different styles have been mixed without observing the significance of a pattern's meaning. This practice is significant in Mombasa and Zanzibar and, to a lesser extent, in Lamu.

Conclusion: Contemporary Swahili Wood Carvers

There is a big difference between the present crop of wood carvers and those past. Observing wood carvers from Lamu, Mombasa and Zanzibar, the majority seems to be copycats. The activities of most carving workshops show, that a lot of emphasis is being laid in the actual day-to-day production, with very little effort in creativity. Due to this, most wood carvers demonstrate a lack of skills in creating their own patterns.

The sense of carving for the sake of satisfying yourself and the community has disappeared completely. Present day wood carvers seem to carve for no other reason other than monetary gains. As a result, wood carving has lost much of its traditional value. Hence, with all the new sophisticated tools found in contemporary workshops, wood carvers have not been able to attain standards equal to the carvings made in the 18th century. Nevertheless, with the emergence of training institutions like the Swahili Cultural Centre in Mombasa, which offer training in Swahili handicrafts with other subjects like technical drawing and Swahili design, things are likely to change.

Acknowledgments

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**Interviews**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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