The Fort

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It was the day Fort Jesus was first opened as a museum. I paused outside for a few minutes and mused about the many roles the old structure had played in its time. Someone had told me only a few days ago, on the indisputable authority of a newspaper - and a newspaper in English at that - that the Portuguese had begun to build the old fort in about the year 1000 after the migration of the Prophet. Now this was the third quarter of the fourteenth century. The Fort's life was a long gallery of masters, defenders, inmates. There before me it still stood, ready for its role as the story-teller.

I wondered about the tale it was going to tell: of the men and women down the centuries whose voices its venerable walls had echoed.

I wondered and mused - and then it happened. Someone shouted "Look-", a car shrieked to a desperate stop, a woman screamed from somewhere and the ground vibrated with running feet. I turned round and saw everyone heading for the stretch of road where Ndia Kuu met Fort Jesus street. I hastened to join the throng.

"The car did not touch her", someone was saying when I reached the spot. In fact, everyone but me seemed to be saying something. "Is she dead?" - "Get an ambulance."- "What happened?" - "I think she is still breathing."- "She is gone all right." And then a commanding voice from the centre of attraction shouted out: "For Allah's sake, don't crowd in like that. She is not dead yet, but she soon will be at this rate. Let her have some air. Push back, you."

I hate to confess it now, but that was my cue. I pushed forward more resolutely to find out what it was that everyone was being asked to push back for.

And then I saw her. She was the oldest woman I had ever seen: and I have seen - and heard - a number in my time. She was sprawled out on the scorching tarmac, her sandals off her feet, her face unveiled. A few inches from where her head held been were the menacing wheels of a motor-car.

Now that head was lifted a little, as a man sponged her

wrinkled face with a damp handkerchief. I recognized the woman at once, and that was all the excuse I needed to push my way - further forward, of course - to the very centre of the scene.

"Hello Aziz", I said kneeling by his side. "What happened?" He turned round to see who it was, and then went on trying to bring the old lady to. "0 hello ... It was very close - I was just about to turn when I saw her - out of the blue - she was already falling - nothing to do with my car she did not even see it - must be the heat and her old age - missed her by a hair breadth-can't understand why any family should let a woman her age out in the streets alone... 0 she is coming to now."

Yes, she was. She opened her eyes wearily, and then whispered: "The mosque. Take me ... the mosque." That was all. A minute later she was dead in Aziz's arms.

There is no need to dwell on the time we spent at the hospital - when the ambulance ca'me we followed it behind: the woman was examined by a doctor as we waited outside anxiously and wondered ... Well, as I was saying, there is no need to dwell on all that. Nor indeed on the statements Aziz and I gave to the police about my standing outside Fort Jesus and admiring the structure from outside before going in and thinking of its history, and how it changed hands between the Portuguese and the Arabs before finally becoming a prison, and then the sudden commotion, and people running .... There is no need to go into all that. All that is necessary to relate is that there was absolutely no way of identifying the woman. All the Police had to go on were the woman's last words. I was the first to tell the Police about her last words. I knew, I just knew they were important. And when Aziz in his statement to the police forgot to mention the first "mosque" that the woman had uttered, I reminded him about it.

But which mosque was she heading for? Women simply do not go to mosques. There is no partition in a mosque, and it is absolutely unthinkable to have men and women rubbing shoulders in a house of God. But Aziz mentioned to the Police the possibility that the woman might have been going to fetch a male relative from there. I confirmed that it was a possibility, for my own mother had often enough come to our

mosque and stood outside till she could get some man
come inside and fetch me.

Granted then that the old lady was after a male relative
prayer, surely considering her position when she collap
and the direction from which she was coming, she had tak
a rather round-about way to either of the two mosques
the vicinity? I considered that a valid argument from one
the policemen - until Aziz pointed out that a woman her
might have lost her way.

To me her age was another mystifying factor. It w
inconceivable that a woman as old as she was should ha
found it impossible to get some younger person to do
errands for her - the neighbor's son or someone like th
What was Mombasa coming to these days?

Be that as it may, the Police called at all the mosques
the locality and made enquiries. Quite a few people ca
along to see if they could identify the woman. None could.

It was then that the police committed sacrilege. Th
actually untied the hirizis that the old lady had round t
upper part of her arms. I suppose to an infidel a hirizi is
more than just a tiny pillow-shaped black-colored curios
tied with black string round the arm. But these we
Mombasa police, and should by then have known that sin
a hirizi was intended to shield its wearer from hidd
dangers, what the tiny "pillow" would contain would be
piece of paper or cloth with a verse from the Qur'an writt
on it. At least the Muslim constable should have known tha

But, they went right ahead and actually cut the hiri
open, as if they expected to find the woman's name a
address inside. They pulled out the content of the first hiri
unfolded it, and - - just as I told them - there was a ver
from the Qur'an and nothing else.

They ravished the other hirizi - just another verse. A
one could have told them that. I had, and they had n
listened.

remember I said to myself on the way, "It would put old Hamisi on the listening side for a change."

Over the usual little cups of black coffee with qat to go with it, the conversation was in earnest when I arrived. Was it necessary to have seven days of feasting every time a young couple got married? This was the argument that was raging.

Old Hamisi was, as usual, up with the cudgels on behalf of the fair sex. He agreed that "in the modern world" (a phrase that was" used in practically every argument, usually in support of abandoning some custom or another), "first things had to come first" (another popular phrase at the cafe- only it baffled me how the 'first things' seemed to vary with every new user of the phrase). Old Hamisi also agreed that there was a lot to be said for the idea that the newly wed should keep the money to start their new life together instead of having the money spent on a few days' celebration to mark the start of their new life together- if we knew what we meant (which, I confess, I did not).

"But if weddings ceased to be really festive, what other occasions will there be for women's fashions?" Old Hamisi wanted to know-or perhaps he did not, for he did not wait for enlightenment but went on to say, "After all, we all know our wives look forward to nothing with greater eagerness than the next wedding they are going to be invited to. They spend their days cooking and looking after children. Occasionally we give them permission to go to the special cinema shows for women. Remove festive weddings from the dear souls' existence, and those ladies' cinema shows will be all the social life they have. Have a heart, you chaps. You do not want them to have no yesterday worth remembering, no tomorrow to which to look forward. By all means, do away with the wedding feasts for men. But let the harem festivities remain.

Surprisingly enough, no one took old Hamisi up on the question of women's yesterdays and tomorrows. Personally, I felt a little uncomfortable at the thought that one or two yesterdays" I had given the fair sex should turn out to be not worth remembering after all.

Someone did retort, though, that the days when women

spent all their time indoors "cooking and looking after children" were over. All sorts of things were coming out. British Council evenings, socials for women and even a women's club had been formed.

It was then that Salim contributed a word to the conversation. He said, "Why, only today I met an old woman, bent with age walking down Mwembe Tayari. She was ninety odd if she was a day. Guess where she was going? She asked me the way to Fort Jesus and wanted to know if it was really true that the ngome was as from today open to the general public. Just think: a woman her age being interested. I do not suppose she even knew what a museum was really supposed to be. It was just the idea of having a look at the novelty that everyone was already talking about, and 'everyone' to her should have been 'every woman'. There's the changed times for you."

Where had he seen her? Mwembe Tayari-why that was two miles from where my story had taken place. I asked Salim to describe his woman and the dress she was wearing. There was no doubt about it. I took Salim with me to the Police Station.

Our information, and it was ours after all, was very welcome. So was our offer to help the Police in a house-to-house enquiry in the Mwembe Tayari area to know the whole Qur'an by heart, but a fellow Muslim will understand when I say that when the constable gave me the second verse to read on that memorable day, I. had a feeling I was reading something of human composition. The stamp of divinity I had recognized on the first verse was missing from the second.

And yet, what was the point of a hirizi if it did not contain something from the Qur'an?

It was on the day of my visit to our town's museum that my curiosity about the whole story received a new boost. Like Ahmed before me, I stood outside first and studied and mused about the time-honoured structure from a little distance. Then I entered the gate.

Not even its years as a container of convictry seemed to have shed an ounce of the majesty. The very passageway was a gallery of -solemnity. I cannot quite describe the

feeling. Suffice it to say that I caught myself tip-toing, as if in fear of disturbing the deep sleep of history.

It was on the beam inside the inner gate that I saw the inscription. It took some doing to make out what it said, but my experience with old documents at the High Court where I worked helped me. The date on the inscription was "Day of Wednesday, 15th Ramadhan 1248". (I have since managed to work that out to February 6, 1833.)

I then read the verses underneath. Yes, there was no mistaking the divine injunction I had read only a few weeks ago at the Police Station.

Three days later I paid a visit to an old woman of seventy. Her name was Mwana Saada.

There was little light in the room. But there was enough for me to see that the mud walls had begun to crumble; that a small opening in one wall and a parting in the palm thatching above was all the ventilation the room got; and that the furniture consisted of a wood-and-rope bed, an old Arab Lamu chest serving partly as a table, a prayer mat, two battered aluminum cooking pots and the usual large red-clay pot of drinking water in the corner. I remember thinking what a contrast this dwelling provided with the new municipal flats across the road. She must have read my thoughts, for she said, "They are going to take me away quite soon. The house will be pulled down". Then she asked me to sit down - on the bed. "I had better sit on the prayer mat. It will soon be sunset, and I have had my ablution. O... you did not touch me, did you?"

I assured her that I had not thus nullified her ablution. Actually, I had remembered that the last thing any one wanted during the two hours separating the late afternoon prayer and the sunset prayer was the touch of a member of the opposite sex.

Mwana Saada, the aging daughter of the woman who had died, then dwelt on the day it happened "I had gone to the neighbors for a little while, and when I came back mother was gone: I did rot know what to do. It was very kind of the police and you, Sir, to take so much trouble."

I said I had done my duty, and so had the police.

"But to think all those police askaris left whatever they were doing to find me and tell me about mother. It was so unexpected - and very kind."

It had never occurred to this honest soul that the group of people that had added a new word "polisi" - to her native Swahili did anything else but chase burglars with whistles.

"Chase burglars" - that is how we drifted into the main topic. But it would be better to tell in a chronological sequence the story 1 had pieced together from my conversation with Mwana Saada.

In the course of that conversation, she had got up and lit the oil lamp, and then holding it up to spread out what light it afforded she said, "Look at this indigence around you, my son. It is a far cry from my childhood."

And thus it was that it was gradually revealed to me that her late mother, Mwana Safia, started her married life as the wife of one of the richest men in old Mvita, way back in the 1870s, during the reign of Seyyid Barghash bin Thuein in Zanzibar. The husband was Bwana Masoud, eminent in his day if for no other reason than the vast coconut estate at Kisauni where scores of slaves worked for him.

Then the great day came. Mwana Safia remembered it to her dying clay. She was sitting in the courtyard on a stool with a maize sieve on her lap (she liked to keep herself thus occupied occasionally). She looked up when the door opened, in the expression of her husband's face - even before he actually nodded an answer to the flitting inquiry in her eyes - she saw the worst confirmed.

One or two cf the slave girls working on the rice in one corner of the courtyard turned to look as their mistress slowly got up from her stool, let go of the sieve almost unconsciously and followed her husband across the courtyard to their room.

"So it's true", she said as she closed the door behind her.

Only if it was true, as Bwana Masoud soon confirmed, there ••'as now no point in talking about the subject behind closed doors. The rumor that had been whispered in great foreboding for weeks, had now culminated in public decree by the Sultan. All slaves were free.

That, if you like, was the real beginning of the story that ended only a few weeks ago before the front wheels of my motor-car. It was the story of change, of bewilderment, yes even of despair. Perhaps above all, it was the story of escape.

The mill of prosperity ground to a standstill. One piece after another of the vast coconut estate was either sold or mortgaged. With better agricultural methods, the situation might have been saved. But new tricks are so difficult to learn: At least they need time and leadership: more time for some, more leadership.

And perhaps those were what Bwana Masoud lacked. It was ten years after emancipation that his former slave, Omar, came up with the proposition. He was among the first to utilize his freedom, and had been very successful in the ever-expanding industry of furniture-making. Omar was humility itself when he expounded the proposition to his former master. But poor Bwana Masoud just could not bring himself to go into partnership with a man he had once1 owned. The guilty and the innocent were to pay dearly for that.

Driven to the poorest part of the town, and clinging to the past with a proud aloofness and contempt for change, the family sank deeper and deeper into poverty and squalor. It was into that squalor that their son was born.

"Poor Abubaker", said Mwana Saada when she finished saying her maghreb prayers. I had come back from the mosque across the road to the dim lantern lighting of her room. "My brother never had a chance. He had three years in the Qur'an school and learned to read the Holy Book. That was all. When he was hardly ten, complaints started coming home – Abu had wilfully broken so-and-so's donkey cart: Abu had snatched and run away with so-and-so's bunch of bananas right outside his shop; Abu was with the gang that had beaten up so-and-so. Never did crime get a younger recruit."

Abubaker might have been saved if another offer by the former slave Omar - to train the boy as a carpenter and bring him up himself in better surroundings - had been accepted. "But whoever said that pride preceded a fall must have had our family in mind", Mwana Saada reflected almost

calmly.

At the age of 21, Abubaker had already spent four years of his young life in jail. At forty-five, he was a respected old timer within the walls of Fort Jesus.

His father had been dead then for many years. Many things had changed. Mombasa itself had become a European town administratively, an Asian town commercially and an African town by virtue of population. Only people like Abu's mother and elder sister really knew what it had been before. They were now obstinate traces of past glories. The elite locality in which they had once been proud to reside had now a new name: it was the 'Old Town', and the old town was coming down piecemeal.

Even the area of land in which Mombasa stood and which the Waingereza had demarcated into a territorial unit had known changes of name. "I remember they used to call it Ibea after their big company", Mwana Saada reminisced. They changed their minds soon enough. They then decided to call it after some big mountain way in the interior - Kenya or something. Is it still called Kenya?" I confirmed that it was.

But the change that Mwana Saada remembered best of all was a very human change. It was just before that last war with the Majarumani that Abubaker got for the first time an early release for good conduct. He was a changed man. He told his mother that he was going to spend the rest of his life trying to make it up to her. "He had said that before", said Mwana Saada, "but this time no one who heard him say it, who saw his eyes, who heard the tremor of anguish in the resolution, could have doubted his sincerity."

Only the "rest of his life" turned out to be less than a year. Afflicted with consumption and knowing that he would not have time in which to make up to his mother and sister, all he could do was to ask their forgiveness.

And then Mwana Saada came to it. "A few days before his death", she said, "he started raving in his sleep. And now and again he came out with a verse from the Qur'an:

"Verily, Allah changeth not the condition of men until they first change what is in their hearts."

* Son can't bring change in father's life although father doesn't accept it himself

Mwana Saada was silent for a while; and so was I, if with different-thoughts.

"There was another verse too, wasn't there?" I finally asked and brought her back to the narrative.

"Yes, but it was not from the Qur'an. Mother knew that from the start, for she had the holy book in her heart. It was a line of poetry. The strange thing was that everytime Abu uttered that line in his ravings, he shook his head vigorously, as if the message fell short of satisfying him. It was that that made us think. We never knew for certain how and why Abu came to be reciting those verses, for he died on the Thursday following. But mother felt that it must have been the verses that had reformed Abu (Zaid), and turned him for the first time into a son she could more than just love. It made such a difference to her last days, dear soul, to have memories of almost a whole year in which respect had shared with tenderness her heart as a mother."

But if the dear lady had known that the second verse was not from the Qur'an, why had she used it in a hirizil .

Mwana Saada answered, "Because she had always believed in it. Her faith had known that message years before her ears heard the verse. Only - only it was by the side of Abu's death bed that she learned for the first time that it was only half the truth. The other half was the Qur'anic verse."

The solemn intonation of the muezzin announcing the last prayer of the day followed her last words, as if to underline them. It was. eight o'clock at night, and I took my leave.

When I reached the door, I remembered my last question. "Just one more thing Mwana Saada. Where was your mother going on that day, do you think?"

"To see the mosque where she thought Abu had learned the truth", she answered. You see, in his ravings just before he died, he had said something else too, usually following the recitations. He had muttered again and again:

"The mosque...the mosque in the Fort."

Thus it was that two days later I was standing before the

lower beam on the south side of the mosque in Fort Jesus.

"O ye calamities of the world", / read "ye ~~are welcome~~ have found protection in the God of the Heavens."

(Originally written in English)

→ ~~If we couldn't~~

→ When you realize, when you surrende
than you get the contempment.

→ Its better to accept the reality.

→ To accept the things.

→ Real position in the world.

→ what sort of personality was of Mavana Sauda?