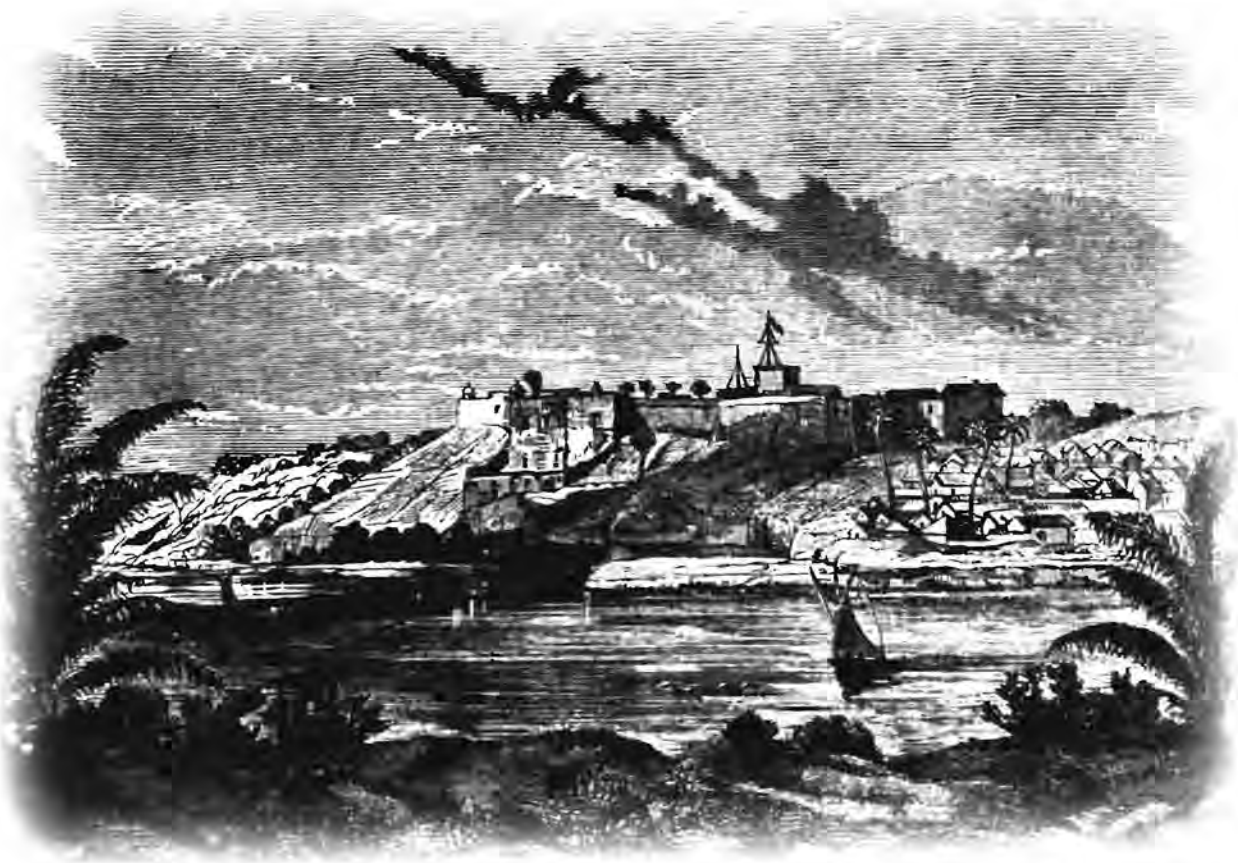


# Pictures of Old Mombasa

Judy Aldrick



## 1. Early view of Mombasa town and Fort Jesus

This engraving taken from a sketch by Baron Von Decken, who visited Mombasa in 1861, shows what Mombasa looked like in those early days. There were not many stone houses and most buildings in the town were single storey with *makuti* roofs. Mombasa at this period was going through a lean time and was an impoverished and second-rate port, with the majority of trade going to Zanzibar.

In order to mark the millennium year, National Museums of Kenya with funding from the Kenya Museum Society, decided to have a photographic exhibition of the three main towns of Kenya - Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu. Displayed simultaneously and then circulated among the museums, old photographs displayed next to recent pictures showed how these towns had developed and changed over the past one hundred years.

The subject matter was of particular relevance as one of the most significant changes in Kenya over the last century

has been the growth of its urban landscape. At the beginning of the 20th century, apart from the coastal towns, Kenya was predominantly rural.

Mombasa at the beginning of the 20th century was the main town at the Coast, although by the standards of today it was hardly more than a large village. The first informal head count of 1901 organised by the Church Missionary Society calculated the population at just 25,400 of which 300 were Europeans, 1,000 were Arabs, 6,524 were Asians and 18,476 were Africans. By 1932, the year of the first national census, the

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*Judy Aldrick is a historian and researcher based in Mombasa. She recently collated the National Museums' photographic exhibition of Old Mombasa, on which this article is based.*

population of Mombasa had risen to 40,000, of which 900 were Europeans, 6,000 were Arabs, 12,000 Asians and 20,000 were Africans.

After World War II the population increased enormously and by 1958 had more than tripled and stood at 145,000: 4,000 Europeans, 14,000 Arabs, 26,000 Asians and 89,000 Africans. Still at this period most of the population lived on the island with just a few settlements beginning on the North and South Coast.

The 1989 census showed yet another dramatic increase when Mombasa's population was estimated at 461,753, of which 6,210 were European, 18,826 called themselves Arabs, 24,619 were Asians, and the remainder 412,098 were Africans. By now greater Mombasa had spread well beyond the confines of the island and Likoni, Kongowea, Bamburi and Changanwe had become part of an ever-increasing suburban sprawl. The population of Mombasa in 2001 is now considered to be approaching a million and by far the greater part of this is housed in informal dwellings on the outskirts of the town.

Nowadays 34% of the total population of Kenya lives in towns and that figure is set in rise. Urban planning and management is becoming one of the most pressing concerns facing Kenya today.

### The exhibition

The Mombasa exhibition was fortunate in having a large amount of photographic material to choose from. Unlike Nairobi and Kisumu, which are new towns built when the railway passed through and colonial settlement began, Mombasa is far older. Hundreds of pictures were taken of old Mombasa. Nearly every colonial pioneer took a snapshot of Mombasa on his arrival, while early

missionaries and officials were not slow to paste a photograph or two in their albums or send a postcard back home to the family. Consequently Mombasa in the early colonial period is well recorded.

### The photographs

This following selection of old photographs based on the Mombasa exhibition barely skims the surface of the archival photographic resource available. It hopes to offer a glimpse of what Mombasa was like at a time when few Kenyans lived in towns, the population was a fraction of what it is today and the technological advances of the modern world had only just begun.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Judy Aldrick arrived in Mombasa in 1982 and since then has been researching aspects of coastal history and taking an active role in the affairs of the Friends of Fort Jesus Society. She has worked at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England, so marriage to a shipping agent and life in a port perhaps came naturally.

In 1987 she was awarded a MLitt from Durham University for her thesis on the 19th Century Carved Doors of Mombasa and the East African Coast. She worked on the conservation plan for Old Town Mombasa and helped compile the inventory of historic buildings. Judy has also compiled a centennial history of the Mombasa Sports Club, a photographic exhibition to mark Mombasa Club's centenary and, most recently, the National Museum's Old Mombasa Exhibition from which the photographs in this article have been taken.



**2. View of Fort Jesus**

This early photograph shows the Fort in dilapidated condition with vegetation sprouting from the walls. The British took over the fort from the Sultan of Zanzibar in 1895 and after some rebuilding and maintenance work turned it into a government prison. This photograph shows it just before that date when it was garrisoned by Baluchi mercenaries who policed the town for the Sultan.

**3. Dhows in the Old Port c.1920**

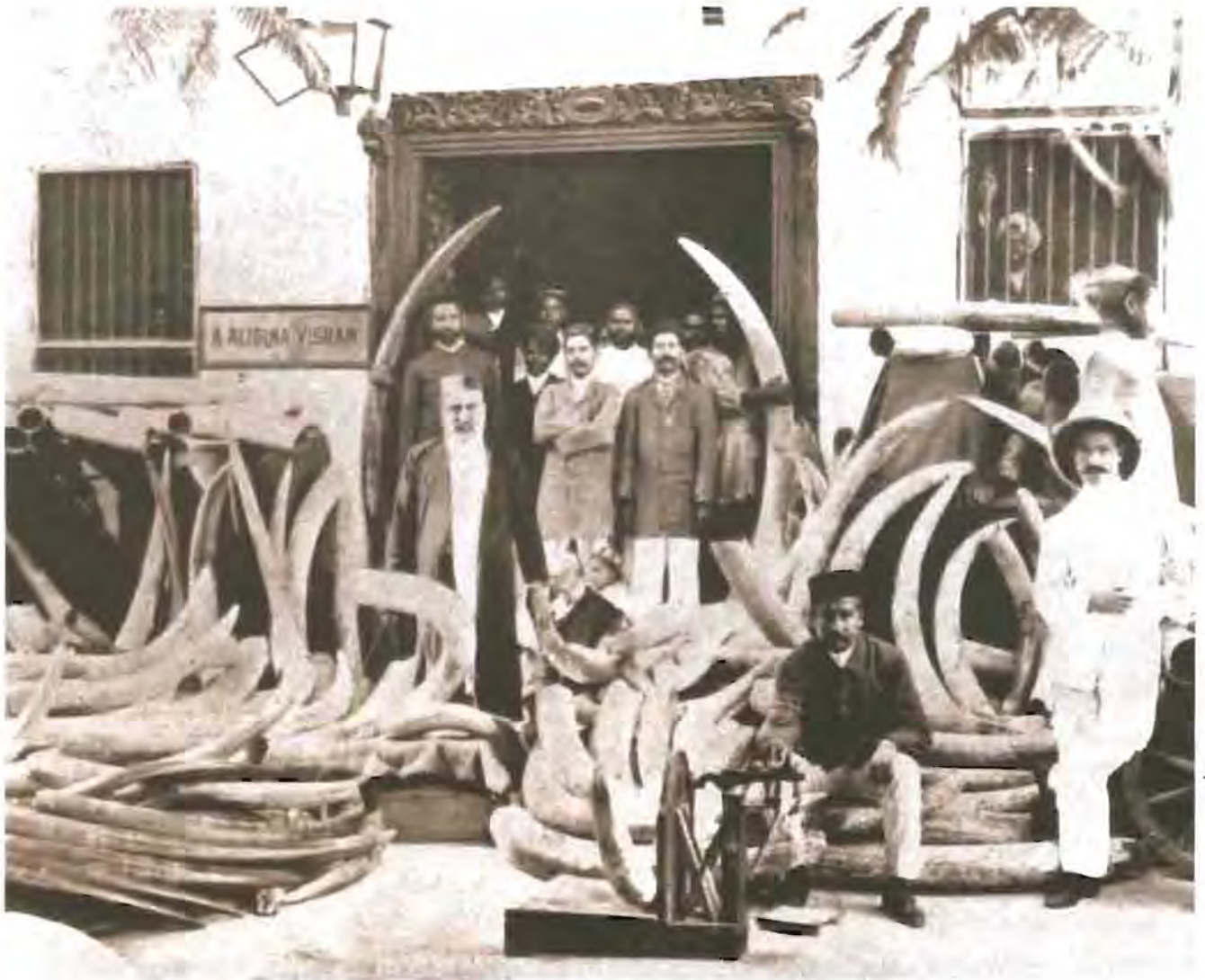
The Indian Ocean dhow trade has always been of great importance to Mombasa. At certain times of year hundreds of dhows could be seen waiting for the trade winds to blow them back to Arabia or India with their cargoes. Nowadays the Old Port has very little traffic as the larger vessels all go to the modern port of Kilindini on the other side of the island.











**Left hand page:**

**4. Bohra mosque**

This view of the harbour taken in the 1920s shows the fine old Bohra mosque and Leven Steps in the background. Bohras are Shia Muslims from Gujerat, India, who settled in Mombasa over a century ago. There is a large and influential community in Mombasa and they are mainly businessmen. This mosque was built in 1901 by one of their most well known pioneers, A M Jeevanjee. A new mosque replaced this one in 1982.

**5. Government Square**

This used to be the hub of the town, when all shipping came through the Old Port. The photograph taken about 1900 shows newly built warehouses and port buildings glistening clean and white in contrast to what it is like today. The building in the distance on the hilltop was replaced by Jeevanjee's mosque. In the foreground you can see the trolley lines that were laid along the main streets of the town.

**This page:**

**6. Alidina Visram outside his office in Government Square**

Alidina Visram was a famous Asian pioneer who worked alongside the colonial administration to open up Kenya and Uganda for overseas trade and development. He was an Ismaili merchant who had first worked in the caravan and transport business in Zanzibar. On arrival in Mombasa in 1898 he was contracted by the British to supply and transport equipment and labour for the building of the railway, which he did very successfully.

Here he is pictured outside his Mombasa office in Government Square opposite the Old Port c.1908 with a large consignment of ivory for export. Notice the very fine carved door, which still exists today.





**7. View of Ndia Kuu 1895**

This view down the main street of the town was taken before any colonial development had taken place. Palm trees rather than tall buildings dominate the skyline and there are no buildings as yet built directly in front of the Fort. See how the trolley lines are just beginning to be laid. The shed in the foreground was probably used as a store for building materials.

**8. View of Ndia Kuu 1910**

This second view shows how rapidly the town developed once the railway project began and overseas investment began to flow into the town. Notice the Indian policemen on patrol.





**9. View of Mbarak Hinawy Street 1898**

This first view of Vasco da Gama Street, as it used to be called, shows the Mandhry mosque in the distance and trolley lines in the foreground. But *makuti* roofing and a village atmosphere still pervade with only the occasional stone building.

**10. View of Mbarak Hinawy Street 1910**

Ten years later the streetscape has changed dramatically. Here colonial officials in white suits can be seen gossiping in the street. There is a trolley waiting for its passengers and the buildings are newly built with balconies and fancy woodwork - the very picture of an up-and-coming town.





**11. Mandhry mosque c.1895 (right)**

The Mandhry mosque with its distinctive minaret is one of the oldest in the town. It was founded in 1570/1. This early picture taken before 1900 shows a congregation of Arabs leaving the mosque. Note the aqueduct bringing water from a well to the mosque. This was later re-routed underground by the British so that the road to the old harbour was not obstructed.



**12. Arab Liwalis (below)**

The picture below shows a group of Arab Liwalis, the representatives of the Sultan of Zanzibar, dressed in ceremonial robes in front of the Mandhry mosque. Salim bin Khalfhan, the *Liwali* of Mombasa and chief Arab leader, is seated in the centre.





**13. Basheikh mosque c.1895 (right)**

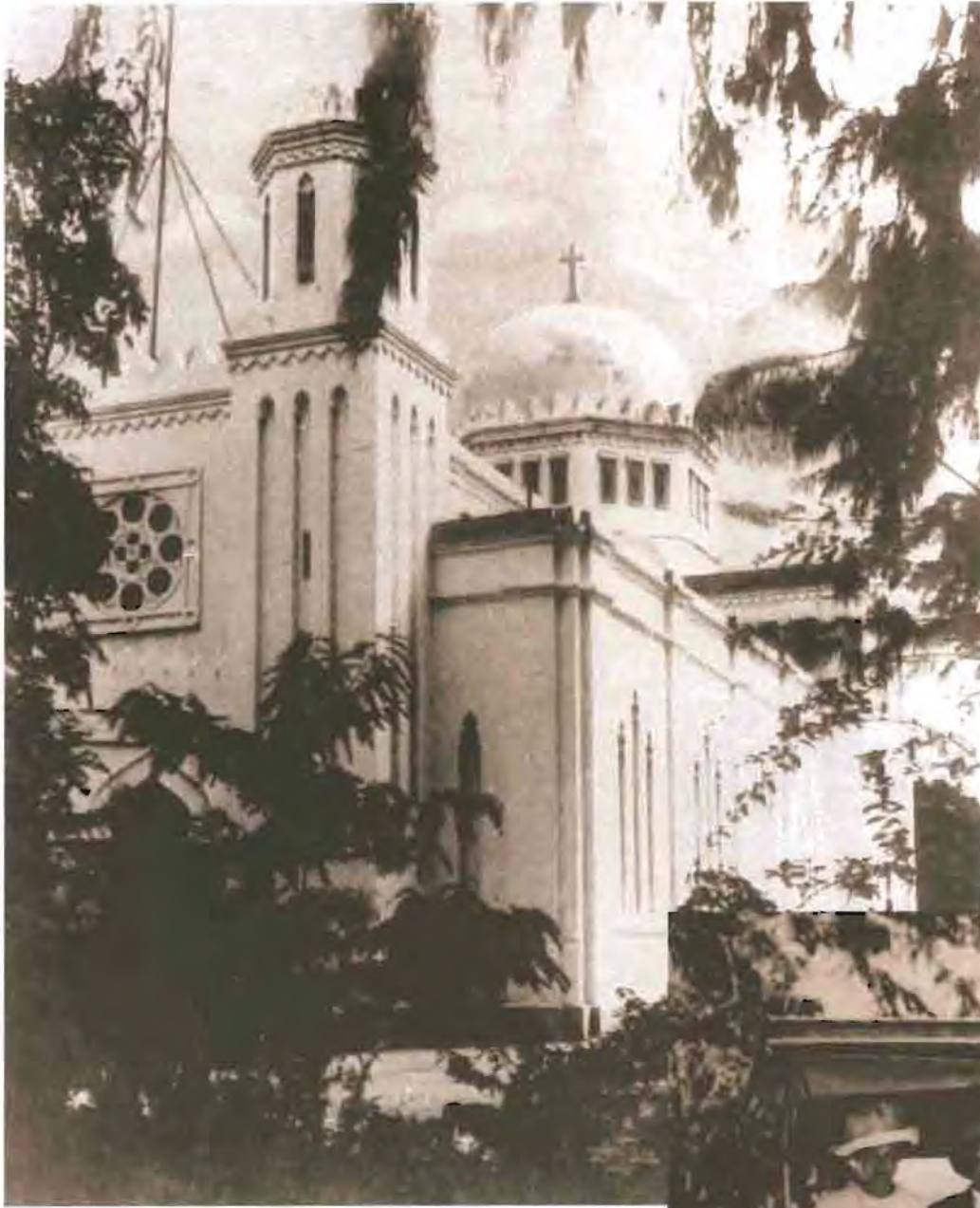
This is the oldest Swahili Mosque still in use in Mombasa and used to be known as the Mnara or Tangana Mosque. The Tangana are one of the Three Tribes of Mombasa, and the representative or *Tamim* was one of the most senior men in town. The covered arcade is still in place and there are some very fine old carved doors within.

**14. Basheikh mosque (below)**

This second view from the other side highlights the mosque's very unusual minaret. Mrs Leonard Beecher took this photograph in 1895.







**15. Mombasa cathedral**

The cathedral was designed by the architect J Sinclair in Saracenic style and was built in 1905. It was built in commemoration of the first two Anglican bishops appointed to Eastern Africa, Hannington and Parker, both of whom died before taking up office.

**16. Trolley picture**

This wedding photograph of a newly married couple was taken in 1913 just outside the cathedral. Many of the early white settlers were married in the Mombasa cathedral, calling their brides out from England once their farms and businesses had become established.







#### 17. Treasury Square

Treasury Square, formerly known as Hamoudieh Gardens, was opened in 1901. Originally a bronze statue of Sir William Mackinnon (1823-1893) founder of British East Africa stood in the centre, but this was removed at Independence. The square is surrounded by several fine colonial buildings all dating c.1900. Undoubtedly one of the finest was the Bank of India shown here on the left, which was built in 1901. This building, which survives almost unchanged, now houses the Kenya Commercial Bank. In the right foreground you can see the Grand Hotel, which today, somewhat modified, houses The Standard Bank of Africa.

#### 18. Old Law Courts building

This fine example of early colonial architecture was opened by Sir Charles Eliot in 1902 as the first High Court in British East Africa. The High Court was later moved to Nairobi. In 1983 when new law courts were built, the Old Law Courts were gazetted as a historical monument and handed over to the National Museums of Kenya. The building now houses a public art gallery, the museum library and the archaeology department of the museum.





#### 19. The Wavell Memorial

This war memorial was put up in memory of Major Wavell and the men of the Arab Rifles who died in battle during World War I (1914-18) in defence of Mombasa. The monument, situated in a small garden below the walls of Fort Jesus, was unveiled in 1922 and was paid for by the people of Mombasa. An Armistice Day ceremony used to be held here each year in thanksgiving for peace. Major Wavell who commanded the volunteer force of Arab Rifles was a colourful character, much loved and respected by the Muslims of the Old Town.

#### 20. Baluchi settlement at Makadara 1900

When the British took possession of Fort Jesus in 1895 the Baluchi garrison with their families were moved out. They were given an area of land on which to settle near the Mbaruk mosque on the outskirts of the Old Town. This they called *Makadara tul Rahman*. (*The abode provided by Allah the Munificent.*) Here you can see the Baluchi settlement with the mosque in the centre. Nowadays this area has been made into a public garden, though both the Mbaruk and Baluchi mosques are still sited there.







### 21. Mackinnon Market

Mackinnon Market, named after Sir William Mackinnon, was built to replace the old open market at Piggot Place. It was built on the site of the former slave market at Konzi. The airy open style and splendid facade makes

this one of the unique buildings of Mombasa. Though the cast iron columns imported from England bear the date 1914, the market was not completed until 1920. This photograph taken in the 1920s shows a sandy open road lined with palm trees. There is very little traffic unlike today and bicyclists and pedestrians mingle freely.



### 22. Biashara Street

Formerly known as Commercial Street, this was built by the Esmailjee Jivanjee family who undertook many building projects in Mombasa and were a prominent Bohra family originally based in Zanzibar. One of the several Jivanjee brothers is pictured here in front of the newly finished shopping street. The street remains a busy one today with many shops mainly selling hardware and textiles.





**23. Digo Road c.1920**

This shows a busy street scene with a typical gathering of Mombasa residents of those days. There is a flagpole in the centre where some official business is being carried out. Note the palm trees in the centre of the road and the total absence of motor vehicles. Digo Road was formerly known as Salim Road.

**24. The Castle Hotel**

This view of Moi Avenue, then called Kilindini Road, shows the Castle Hotel in its original splendour. Built as the Palace Hotel in 1908/9, it catered mostly to wealthy travellers seeking adventure in Africa. This photo dates soon after the fourth storey was added in 1928. The name was changed to the Castle in 1964 and sadly nowadays it stands empty and derelict. The building in the right foreground belonged to the trading



company Boustead and Clarke. Rex Boustead was the founder of the Mombasa Club and he and his partner ran the main safari outfitters in town. The firm folded in the 1950s and the Diamond Trust has erected a new building on the site.





**25. Mail carriers c.1890**

This is how the mail was carried a hundred years ago, before the railway was built, when the only means of transport was on foot. Mail runners worked in stages and were remarkable for their speed, endurance and regularity.

The average time for the transport of mail from Mombasa to Eldama Ravine was 20 days, which meant a daily journey of 25 miles. In the year 1896-7 not a single package of mail was lost.

**26. Early site of post office**

The post office was always an important building in Mombasa. Many of the Indians working on the railway sent their wage packets home to help their families in India. This kept the staff at the post office very busy right from the start. This building in Treasury Square nowadays houses the offices of the municipal educational services. The main post office has moved to an enormous highrise office block in Digo Road.







**27. Nyali ferry**

Taken c.1900, this shows passengers waiting to be ferried across from the missionary settlement at Freretown to Mombasa Island. As you can see, in those days the ferry consisted of a simple rowing boat. The crossing point used to be from the sandy beach opposite Leven Steps. This is where caravans would gather before setting off upcountry.

**28. Old Nyali Bridge**

The first Nyali Bridge was a floating or pontoon bridge, which was completed in 1931. It was 1,300 feet in length and weighed 4,000 tons. The bridge was kept in place by 30 large anchors on heavy chains. It took two years to build and was put together by 350 *wananchi* and two expatriate engineers using one million rivets. It was finally dismantled in 1983 to make way for the modern concrete bridge. This photograph taken from the Nyali side shows the Alidina Visram School, which is the large white building beyond the bridge.







**29. Likoni ferry c.1920**

The Likoni ferry was first developed in 1914 in order to transport troops across to the south mainland during World War I. Up to 1926 it consisted of a pontoon with a motorboat lashed alongside, but in 1926 the first motorised ferry was introduced. This picture shows one very old-fashioned truck being transported together with a handful of passengers. A far cry from the crowded Likoni ferries of the present day, which operate 24 hours daily and carry vast numbers of passengers and vehicles.

**30. Camel cart**

Camels are no longer seen in Mombasa town, but in the 1920s when this picture was taken they were much in evidence. Not only used for pulling small carts, they were also harnessed to the simple machinery for grinding oil seeds. The handcart or *mkokoteni* has taken over in recent times.







**31. Makupa forts**

This early photograph of c.1895 shows the remains of the Portuguese forts at Makupa. This was Mombasa Island's most vulnerable point where it could most easily be attacked from the mainland, being the closest point of access. The Portuguese built defensive fortresses here, which nowadays no longer exist. The dugout canoe you can see was used for crossing over the shallow waters, which at low tide could be easily forded.

**32. Makupa Causeway**

In 1896 Sir George Whitehouse built a wooden railway bridge to connect the island to the mainland. The permanent iron railway bridge was built in 1898. This picture shows the first water pipeline under construction, bringing a fresh water supply to Mombasa. Water was always a major concern in the early days. From 1896-1901 water was distilled from the sea at a distilling plant in Changamwe and transported from there. The nearest good water supply was at Voi, 100 miles away. Today Makupa Causeway still provides a vital link with the mainland. There is a road, a pipeline and a railway bridge.







**33. Kilindini Harbour**

Sir George Whitehouse, the chief engineer in charge of building the railway, first established the port at Kilindini. In 1896 he bought 372 acres of land near the natural harbour of Kilindini as a railway depot. In the early days, cargoes and railway material were landed from lighters on the beach at Kilindini, but a jetty was soon built and cargo sheds sprang up as well. This early view shows the port under construction.

Some railway lines have already been laid and there is a goods train in the foreground but not much else.

**34. Kilindini Harbour**

This photograph dating some years later shows the original pier with cranes and railway trucks waiting for goods to be offloaded. Across the water on the other side can be seen the first Shell Oil Terminal. Until 1922, when the first deep water berth was built, ships had to anchor out at sea as there were no quayside berths.



## Notes on the Photographic Collections:

The bulk of the photographs shown on the preceding pages have been taken from the Friends of Fort Jesus photographic collection. This collection was started in 1980 by the photographer Maurice Taffe and the art historian Rosemary Macdonald, who were founding members of the Society.

Later in 1982 I joined the team. Realising that the old buildings and monuments of Mombasa were fast disappearing before our eyes, we decided to make a photographic record. Slowly the project was expanded to include the history of Mombasa as well and whenever a picture of Mombasa in an old book or on a postcard turned up, it was copied and added to the collection. Private albums were lent and, in the interest of preserving a record for posterity, institutions and communities were approached for permission to copy their historic photographs. Sometimes photographs were donated. John Jewell left us his negatives of dhows and the Royal Navy gave aerial pictures of Mombasa.

On the departure of Rosemary in 1985, I carried on with Maurice Taffe making a photographic inventory of all the carved doors of Lamu and Mombasa and continuing to add historic photographs to the collection. When Maurice too left Kenya, I - the last to remain from the original team - tried hard to continue, but without a darkroom or the expertise of a professional photographer, the copying work suffered.

There have however been more additions of photographs and with the help of a Japanese volunteer photo archivist who joined the museum staff in 1999, copies were recently made of an interesting set of photographs belonging to the Hinawy family showing royal visits in the 1950s. At present the collection consists of over 2,000 photographs about half of which have negatives and have been catalogued.

The other important photographic collections of Mombasa are held in Nairobi. There is the Gladys Beecher Collection in the National Museum, the Hollis Collection at the National Archives, and the Railway Museum Collection. All these contain a great many Mombasa photographs dating back to the early 1900s and even earlier. In UK there are further collections, one of the oldest being held by the Church Missionary Society. The personal papers of early colonial officials, some of which are held at Rhodes House in Oxford, are another rich source of photographic material for Mombasa.

Old photographs and postcards are increasingly being recognised not only as important historical documents but also as artworks in their own right. Mombasa is fortunate to have such a rich photographic archive and it is hoped that the Museum will make use of this resource to organise further photographic exhibitions.

*Judy Aldrick  
Mombasa*

Fort Jesus - from WFW Owen, *Narrative of Voyages to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia and Madagascar.* London 1833

