THE CONFERENCE 2006

‘Sails of History: Citizens of the Sea’

Swahili specialist Ahmed Shiekh Nabahany showing a model of a Jahazi at the conference
(Courtesy: M. Pearson)
Sailing in a Jahazi in Zanzibar harbour (Courtesy: A. Sheriff)

A monsoon dhows sailing to Mombasa, 1974 (Courtesy Marion Kaplan)

A presentation on the Zanzibar Stone Town. (Courtesy: Anne Bang)
When the theme of the conference was being defined last year it was hoped that the Festival will also be an occasion for Zanzibar to come alive once again as a dhow port that it was until the middle of the last century, when hundreds of dhows used to come with the monsoons, and transform the life. It was a dream to bring together all the different sailing boats of the Indian Ocean in the Zanzibar harbour – thus the title of the Festival. To focus our attention, we had decided to concentrate on themes related to the dhows, their building and navigation within their social contexts. Unfortunately the dream did not materialise. One of the reasons was the reality of the Dhow Culture whose rhythm was set by the monsoons. The Southwest Monsoon (Kusi) when fully developed in June and July is very boisterous, and long-distance sailing comes to a halt. This is the season of refitting of the dhows in their home ports. The other is the sad fact that the age of long-distance monsoon dhows from these distant places has come to an end.

We nevertheless decided to give a taste of dhow sailing to the participants by organising a voyage in a replica of a monsoon dhow. There is an Indian kotia in East African waters, the ‘Sanjeeda’, which also has powerful diesel engines and serves the tourism industry. Unfortunately it had to sail away only a few days before for dry-docking in Mombasa. Instead the participants had an authentic taste of dhow sailing in a coastal Swahili Jahazi which still ply the East African waters.

Contributors to the conference came from as far as Australia, India, Europe and East Africa, including Zanzibar; unfortunately a few had to drop out at the last moment for unavoidable reasons. The conference also attracted a large number of participants from many other parts of the world, showing that the subject, and the idea of a conference as part of a film festival, has widespread appreciation. It is to be hoped that there will be even better representation in future conferences of contributors from the Dhow Countries in the deliberation of their culture.

The conference opened with a documentary by Philip Beale on the construction of a double outrigger of the type that may have carried people from Indonesia to Madagascar, and perhaps even to West Africa more than 1000 years ago. It was followed by papers exploring early seafaring right across the Indian Ocean from South East Asia to the Swahili coast. Martin Walsh and Gwyn Campbell outline the state of knowledge on population movements out of and back into Africa, and on voyaging in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. These voyages may have left in their wake not only the outrigger canoes, but may have also introduced south-east Asian food crops, such as bananas, and musical instruments, such as xylophone, to many parts of Africa.

‘Sails of History’: Review of the Conference
By Professor A. Sheriff
Although the Age of the Monsoon Dhow may have come to a close, the culture that it has nurtured over the past 2000 years has developed a momentum of its own. This is reflected not only in the cosmopolitan cultures of the rainbow population of the Indian Ocean littoral, but even in the dhow building technologies all around the ocean. There were a number of papers on the dhow building technology in the Indian Ocean basin.

The great antiquity of the sailing tradition was demonstrated from Indian art and archaeology by Alok Tripathi, and Tom Vosmer elaborated on a technical and cultural marker in boat construction in Oman and the Persian Gulf. Abdul Sheriff and his colleagues presented a report on the construction of the Mtepe, a quintessentially Swahili sewn vessel which used to ply the waters of the East African coast until the 1930s but which is now extinct. Ahmed Sheikh Nabahany and Roosje de Leeuwe discussed the Swahili boat building tradition, and the latter focussed in particular on how the technology may have spread and provide an insight into how a dynamic ‘maritime society’ functions and interacts.

Following the experience of sailing in the Jahazi, the last day of the conference started with a slide show of one of the last monsoon voyages in 1974 by Marion Kaplan, although she could not be present herself. Sailing vessels conveyed not only goods and passengers, but also their culture, and unfortunately diseases as well. Amina Issa traced the spread of diseases during the 19th century, such as cholera, but also traditional medical knowledge around the Indian Ocean.

However, Zanzibar’s adventure with the Sails of History was not confined to the Indian Ocean. Since the entry of the Portuguese at the end of the 15th century, the Indian Ocean had begun to be integrated into the wider world, and the square-rigged European vessels have not been an uncommon sight in Zanzibar harbour. It was therefore fitting that the conference should end with a reminder by Anne Bang on Zanzibar’s Norwegian connection which not only provided Scandinavian timber, but in return left a cultural marker in a Norwegian romantic song:

‘He promised me a ring from Zanzibar.
But Zanzibar, where is that place?’

To prove that Zanzibar does really exist, by popular demand, the participants from distant parts of the world were treated, as a bonus to cap a very successful conference, to a guided tour of the famed Zanzibar Stone Town. With the aid of a powerpoint presentation and a walking tour, Professor Sheriff guided the participants through the town which is an architectural agglomeration of the Swahili, Arab, Indian and British colonial building traditions, and a cultural synthesis typical of the Indian Ocean world, which has now been declared a World Heritage Site.