

Masjid Sharif Ahmad, the oldest mosque in Somalia

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(English translation revised by Said Ahmed Abdulrahman Al-Hatimy)

Before bringing to your attention the existence of a precious monument in the heart of Shangaani, I should like to begin by recalling the UNESCO Recommendation regarding the safeguarding and the contemporary role of historic areas, *“Every historic area and its surroundings should be considered in their totality as a coherent whole whose balance and specific nature depend on the fusion of the parts of which is composed and which include human activities as much as the buildings. All valid elements, including human activities, however modest, thus have a significance in relation to the whole which must not be disregarded”*¹



Fig. 1. Flooded lane in the historical centers.

Considering the advanced level of deterioration in the state of the historical monuments of Mogadishu and the gravity of the situation due to the grabbing of historical sites and the erection of modern

constructions there, it becomes imperative to institute a governmental organization that deals with the problems of Mogadishu historical centers – because of the tremendous disaster caused by the civil war - and Somalia as a whole. Most important would be the creation of an organization which encompasses professionals like archaeology, restorers, historians, architects, engineers etc. whose collective work could yield better results. For example, it is not enough to restore the ceiling or the flowery *Kufic* inscriptions of an ancient mosque when the setting which embraces them is not secured from future possible deteriorating agents and when the environs which hosts the whole historical artifact is not



Fig. 2. The modern Sharif Ahmed Mosque erected over its predecessors. The offices of the headquarters of the “Shingaani Heritage & Private Protection Council” belong to the mosque.

safeguarded, e.g. from roof leakages and during rainy seasons and floods due to rains. Hence, the preservation of ruined monuments involves not only their physical structures, but also their setting and their surrounding territories. Often the residents in the neighborhoods of these historical sites are the culprits due to their ignorance, consequently, their irresponsible behavior towards these precious monuments. Therefore, they need to be educated, in how to deal with these sites and also the government should implement strict norms. However, the safeguarding of our heritage depends upon our people and the best and wisest policies and governments cannot alone secure the protection of these historical sites, if the residents lose faith or interest in them and especially when they feel that policies and laws are being imposed upon them.

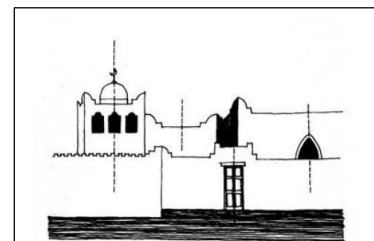


Fig. 3. Sharif Ahmed's Mosque (the drawing of the Italian architect Vittorio Gandolfi). In 1986, it was demolished and replaced by the present one.

¹ UNESCO Recommendation concerning the safeguarding and contemporary role of historic areas, 1976, par 3.

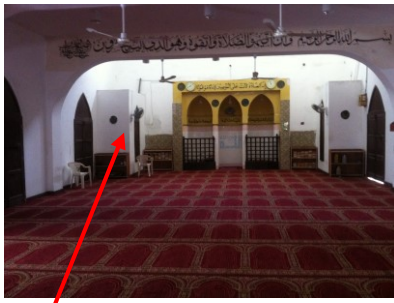


Fig. 5 The modern internal structure of Sharif Ahmed's Mosque. To the left of the mihrab there is a small spiral staircase which leads to the small underground space relics of the ruins of the oldest mosques in Mogadishu



Figura 4 "[...] the find revealed extensive of stone walls and other structures. On the northern wall several building phases could be seen in the ornaments at mihrab and as plaster floors"

Archeologists examine historical sites by digging trenches to reveal the different layers of earth that built up over time. Each layer could be the source of precious information about the use of the land in the past and traces of the people who lived there. One of the oldest districts of Africa is in Mogadishu and is called Shangaani. Unlike the Hamarweyne quarter, which is located on a coral reef, Shangaani is standing on sand soil. In the course of time, the ground surface in both areas has risen compelling their residents to fill the building's floors and to increase the height of their walls or to add another storey to the edifices. Today, visiting the Shangaani area provokes a sense of sadness, because of the severe damage inflicted to it during the



Fig. 6. Underground of Sharif Ahmed Mosque. The Two mihrabs of the ancient buried mosques.

years of anarchy. Along the main street of this medieval quarter, there is the Sharif Ahmed's mosque which was restored a few years ago. It is wide, spacious, well maintained but almost always empty – contrary to the period before the Somali civil war. Under it, in an accessible corner, there is a small archaeological treasure: the ruins of the oldest mosque in Mogadishu. On a wooden panel (Fig. 7), that was found during the excavations, there is engraved the name of the

last constructor and the date of the reconstruction or of the renovation of the mosque, that is 1243 H/ 1827 CE. Sharif

Ahmed's mosque is composed of three mosques built one upon another. The earlier two are completely buried under the soil. Hence, the Sharif Ahmed mosque we see today represents a third mosque erected above the earlier two which were smaller in size but with very nice structure aesthetically appreciated by the local and the foreign tourists. The discovery of the two earlier phases of the mosques was by accident, following the destruction of the then standing one. In 1985, the discovery of the buried *mihraab*,ⁱ which belong to the earlier mosques, drew the attention of archaeologists from the UNESCO and also from the local pressⁱⁱ. The discovery of the buried *mihraab* has great significance for the reconstruction of the history of Mogadishu because it means that in the ground could be found, not one but two levels of archaeological areas, one on top of the other.



Fig. 7. In the long panel: on the first and on a section of the second row there is written the Aayah 255 of Sura Al Baqara , which is called "Ayatul kursi". This is followed by "This mosque was built by al-Sayid Abdalla bin al-Sayid Awiikar bin al-Sayid Abdalla Al-Nadhir. The afternoon of Tuesday the 22nd of Jimaadul Awal, year 1243 A.H. [corresponding to Wednesday 12 of December 1827]

On the short panel: the first row is the Aayah 127 of the Sura Al Baqara. The row below states "[this mosque] was built by Sayid Habib bin Sayid Muhiddin Aal Masilah. Banadir, Friday the 12 of the month of Rabicul Aakhir of the year 1304 A.H. [corresponding to Friday 7, January 1887].



Fig. 8. The niches of the ancient underground section of Sharif Ahmed Mosque. The need for their repairing is evident.

During the years of anarchy, the people of Shangaani fled abroad and the neighborhood became a no man's land for nearly two decades. Only few months ago did we clean the Sharif Ahmed's archaeological site which was closed for many years, as no one dared to enter it for fear of falling debris from the ceiling.

The Swedish archaeologist Anders Broberg of the Central Board of National Antiquities of Sweden, that lead the excavations with the assistance of Ahmed Dualeh Jaama of Somali Academic of Science wrote, "During a foundation work for a new mosque in central Shingaani in Mogadishu, late 1985, trace of number of older mosque were found. The rescue excavation following the find revealed extensive of stone walls and other structures. On the northern wall several building phases could be seen in the ornaments at mihrab and as plaster floors". "[...] A dating of the different rebuilding

phases will be based on the youngest dateable sherds in the filling under the floor level. This for example mean that the mosque demolished during the winter of 1985-86 (phase A) has been erected after 1730-40, phase B during the seventeenth century, phase C-E during the sixteenth century and the phase F-G after the year 1200 A.D."ⁱⁱⁱ While the Dualeh wrote "Moreover, the datable material from the Shangani Mosque is not in its original context but derives from a later filling. Therefore, it seems very probable that the first phase of the mosque building could have been a century or so earlier than the material which comes from layer 8 and is dated to the eleventh century AD, while the last phase of the mosque reconstruction is dated by a wooden manuscript which we found in the top layer."^{iv}

The recommendations of the Jordanian consultant of UNESCO, prof. Lutfi A. Khalil, are useful to understand what should be the approach to the antiquity once they are discovered. In the late 1986 he wrote:^v

It seems that the Mosque is the oldest known Islamic monument in Mogadishu, and therefore merits being preserved and presented as a tourist attraction for the city. This could be accomplished by:



Fig. 9. In 1986 the National press, Xiddigta Oktoobar, advertised strongly the discovery of the underground section of Sharif Ahmed mosque.

- *Keeping parts of the three plaster floors as terraces to show the different stages of usage of the mosque;*
- *Building a barrier around the site in order to keep it clean, as well as for the safety of the residents of the area;*
- *Covering the whole site with a shelter of corrugated translucent plastic sheets to prevent rain from falling into the excavated area. If this protection is not provided, damage would not only be caused to the ancient plaster layers and the masque, but also to the foundations of the houses and the new mosque. The shelter could be attached to a strong metal frame, anchored on three sides to the ground and fixed on the fourth side to the roof of the new mosque,*
- *providing a rain slope to the north;*
- *Building a channel in the north part of the ancient mosque, to enable water to be taken far away from the site;*
- *Opening a door on the east side of the whole site, which would prevent visitors from encroaching on the preserved plaster floors and other parts of the building;*
- *Employing a guard to open and close the doors for visitors when necessary, and to superintend the site generally;*
- *Installing the site with electricity to provide light when necessary;*
- *Locating sign posts on the main streets of the city to direct visitors to the site. An information panel should be set up near the entrance of the Mosque to describe and explain the history of the building.*

- *A pamphlet would be useful for more detailed information. Local and international languages should be used for these items.*

I have fully quoted the recommendations by prof. Lutfi because it is a vision that the Mogadishu politicians and residents lack while it is followed by most countries of the world that are lucky enough to have archaeological sites. The monuments with their relative history are not just a question of identity but they also mean tourist attraction, hence, source of economy for the city and the country.

ⁱ Mihraab. A niche in the wall of a mosque to indicate the *qiblah*, the direction of Mecca, towards which all Muslims turn in prayer. It also provides a reflecting surface so that the voice of Imaam is clearly heard by those behind him

ⁱⁱ Xiddigta Oktoobar, 7 January 1986.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anders Broberg, "New aspects of the medieval towns of Benadir in southern Somalia", 1995, pag. 118, 120.

^{iv} Ahmed Dualeh Jama, The Origins and Development of Mogadishu. AD 1000 to 1850, pag. 62.

^v Lutfi A. Khalil, Excavation of Shangani Mosque - Museum Development and Antiquities Preservation. Restricted Technical Report RP/1986-1987/XI.1.3. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Paris, 1986, pag. 4.