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FURTHER NOTES ON THE STAIRCASE MINARET

BY J. SCHACHT

MORE THAN 20 YEARS AGO, I HAD OCCASION to point out that the earliest type of minaret in Islam, consisting of a flight of steps leading straight up to the roof of the building at one of its corners, with a small sentry box or lanternlike structure on top of the corner itself, has survived, together with some closely related variants, in the countryside of Egypt and in central and western Anatolia.¹ Then, in 1950, I noticed that the staircase minaret, as a rule reduced to a simple flight of steps along one of the walls of the mosque from outside, is *de rigueur* in the mosques of the Fulānis in northern Nigeria, and I traced the transmission of this architectural feature to that remote region from Tunisia (Sousse and the island of Djerba) by way of the oasis of Ouargla.² A derived form of the staircase minaret, where instead of the small lantern we find a massive bastion, but still with the essential element of an independent flight of steps leading up to it, occurs in Sousse, in Djerba, in Ouargla, and, in a rudimentary form, also in northern Nigeria.

Since then, I have noticed staircase minarets in a number of other places, and the purpose of this note is, without aiming at completeness in any way, to give some idea of their wide distribution.

For the Maghrib, I will mention the mosque of the village of Beni-Achir, in the territory of the Beni Snoûs (west-southwest of Tlemcen), where a flight of steps along the

¹ *Ein archaischer Minaret-Typ in Ägypten und Anatolien*, *Ars Islamica*, vol. 5 (1938), pp. 52-54.

² *Sur la diffusion des formes d'architecture religieuse musulmane à travers le Sahara*, *Travaux de l'Institut de Recherches Sahariennes*, vol. 11 (Algiers, 1954), pp. 11-27.

inside of the east wall leads to a little cell (1 m. by 1.30 m.) at roof level, with a narrow rectangular opening or loophole on each side; from outside, this cell has the appearance of a small bell turret with a pyramidal roof. The building is probably old, dating perhaps from the seventh or eighth century A.H.³

For Syria, we have the Great Mosque of Boşrā, constructed in 102 A.H.⁴ This mosque has a tower minaret, of the well-known square Umayyad type, at its northeast corner, but there is also a flight of steps, outside and along its western wall, rising toward, though not quite reaching, its northwestern corner.⁵ It does not seem to have been noticed so far that this is a staircase minaret. There are numerous mosques in Djerba provided both with a tower and with a staircase minaret; the mosques of Arkou and of El May give particularly close parallels.⁶

For the Sudan, I will refer to the house of the Khalifa 'Abdallāh in Omdurman, which has a staircase minaret, although there is no special room set apart as a place for prayer there (*fig. 1*).

For East Africa, I will set out my evidence in more detail, having discussed the survival

³ A. Bel, *Les Beni Snoûs et leurs mosquées*, *Bulletin Archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques* (year 1920), pp. 479-521 (p. 516 and *fig. 8* on p. 515).

⁴ J. Sauvaget, *La mosquée omeyyade de Médine*, Paris, 1947, p. 101.

⁵ Howard C. Butler, *Syria*, Division II, Section A, Leyden, 1919, pp. 289 (photograph), 291 (plan). The greater part, if not the whole, of this staircase is fixed in the original, not the reconstructed, portion of the wall.

⁶ *Sur la diffusion*, etc., p. 20 and *figs. 25, 27-29*.

of another archaic feature in Islamic religious architecture there in a previous paper.⁷ I have distinguished there two styles of mosque architecture, one proper to the vanished Islamic civilizations mainly of the Middle Ages, and the other represented by more recent buildings but continuing a very old popular tradition which must have coexisted with the first one. It deserves to be pointed out that the staircase minaret occurs with equal frequency in mosques of both styles. In the great majority of cases, the minaret consists of a flight of steps only, without a lantern.

MOSQUES OF MEDIEVAL STYLE

Kaole (lower site, properly called Pumbuji), northwestern mosque: See *Plan A*, where the cross-hatched portion denotes a steeply rising mass of stone masonry, presumably the remains of a collapsed turning staircase minaret. Where the length of the wall is not sufficient for the flight of steps to gain roof level, it is carried around a corner; I know at least one example from Egypt,⁸ and many more from East Africa (see below).

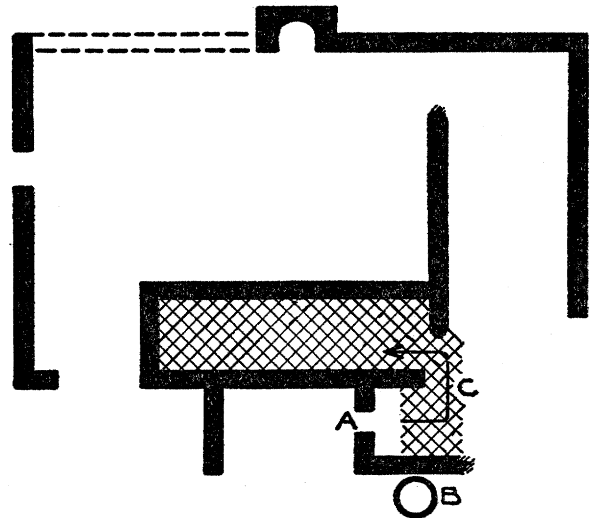
Kaole (Pumbuji), southeastern mosque: See *Plan B*, where the cross-hatched portion denotes similar remains of what was probably a staircase minaret outside and along the western wall, leading to the northwestern corner of the building.⁹

Shamiani on *Kiweni Island*, off Pemba (Mkoani District): The relevant feature has been described as follows: "The mass of the ruins jut out in front of the *kibla*, on its east side where there seems to have been a tower

⁷ *An unknown type of minbar and its historical significance*, *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 2 (1957), pp. 149-173.

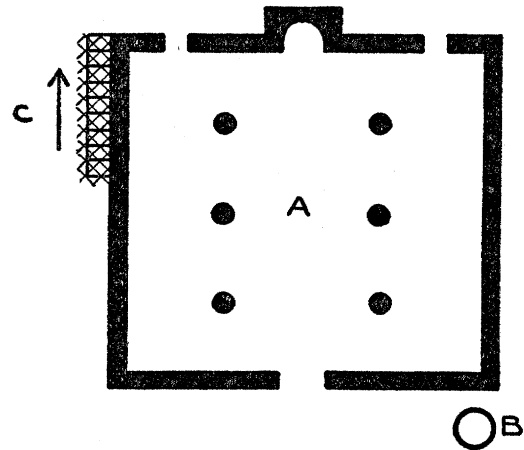
⁸ *Ars Islamica*, vol. 5, p. 53.

⁹ The *qibla* in East Africa is (roughly) to the north.



PLAN A—KAOLE (PUMBUJI), NORTHWESTERN MOSQUE.

A, Arched doorway; *B*, well; *C*, collapsed staircase minaret (?).



PLAN B—KAOLE (PUMBUJI), SOUTHEASTERN MOSQUE.

A, Prayer hall with columns; *B*, well; *C*, collapsed staircase minaret (?).

[sic] for the *mu'ezzin* and stairs leading up to it."¹⁰

¹⁰ Laurence A. C. Buchanan, *The ancient monuments of Pemba*, The Zanzibar Museum, Zanzibar (Government Printer), 1932, p. 5. It should be

Kichokochwe, Pemba (Chake Chake District, northern portion) : I quote again: "Outside [the western part of the *qibla* wall] in the [northwest] corner is a tower [sic] for the *mu'ezzin*, with steps giving access to it from the raised masonry foundation on which the mosque is built."¹¹

Gedi, Great Mosque: The excavator of the site, Mr. Kirkman, says: "From this court [the well court, between the well and the veranda, which is built onto the east side of the mosque proper] steps led up to the veranda and on to the roof of the mosque, from which the call to prayer was given."¹² This would date, according to Mr. Kirkman's provisional chronology,¹³ from about the first half of the tenth century A.H. From my own observation I can say that we have here the remains of a turning staircase minaret, the upper part of which has disappeared; there is nothing to warrant the assumption that the call to prayer was made from the roof of the mosque and not from the top of the minaret.

Ishikani, on the coast of northern Kenya, near the frontier of Somalia: A staircase minaret is clearly visible on a photograph of this ruined mosque which Mr. Kirkman allowed me to see.

I have not noticed minarets in the other mosques of medieval style of which I have knowledge, except for the ruined mosque at Ras Mkumbuu, Pemba, on which the evidence available to me is conflicting.¹⁴

realized that the author is unaware of the existence of the staircase minaret.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹² J. S. Kirkman, *The Arab city of Gedi*, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 3; cf. p. 6f., pl. iiB, and fig. 1C, p. 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ F. B. Pearce, *Zanzibar*, London, 1920, p. 370; a sketch plan which Mr. Kirkman allowed me to see in 1953; a letter from Mr. Kirkman of April 27, 1958.

MOSQUES OF MODERN STYLE

Bagamoyo, Great Mosque: The ground plan of this mosque¹⁵ is typical of that of the majority of mosques in East Africa: a prayer hall, preceded by an open forecourt, which in its turn is preceded by a hall with a basin for ablutions. In this particular case, the east part of the forecourt is taken up by an outbuilding containing storerooms, etc., and built onto the south wall of it is a staircase minaret, rising up to roof level (*fig. 2*).

Bagamoyo, Baluchi Mosque (Hanafī): This mosque has a staircase minaret in the forecourt, rising up to a high terrace.¹⁶

Kilomo (six miles south-southeast of Bagamoyo): The minaret of this mosque consists of a short wooden ladder leaning against a palm trunk in front of the mosque (*fig. 3*); the underlying idea is the same as that of the staircase minaret.

Zanzibar Town (Ngambo quarter), Masjid Bi Zrēli: The same tripartite ground plan as in the Great Mosque of Bagamoyo; staircase minaret in the forecourt, built against the eastern part of the south wall of the prayer hall; it ends at roof level in a balcony that juts out over the street.

Zanzibar Town (Malindi quarter), Masjid Muzāhim (with a building inscription of 1235 A.H.): Staircase minaret in the forecourt, built against its eastern wall and leading to the southeast corner of the prayer hall; the last step and the final platform, a few inches above roof level, describe a left turn. I mention this in order to emphasize the difference between a staircase minaret and a utilitarian staircase giving access to the roof.

Zanzibar Town (Malindi quarter), Masjid Ḥalwā: Tripartite ground plan, staircase minaret occupying the whole length of the

¹⁵ Cf. *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 2, p. 159, plan G.

¹⁶ The mosque of the Maymans in Bagamoyo has a tower minaret.

east wall of the forecourt and rising away from the prayer hall, so that it reaches roof level above the partition between forecourt and ablution hall.

Zanzibar Town, Masjid Sayyidī Ḥamūd (Ibāḍī): Staircase minaret in the forecourt, built against its eastern wall and leading to the southeast corner of the prayer hall; the same staircase gives access to visitors' quarters, a common feature of Ibāḍī mosques in East Africa, on the upper floor of an adjoining building, but that it is indeed a minaret is shown by a small dome covering its upper platform.

Zanzibar Town, Laghbiri Mosque (Jāmi' al-Aghbari, Ibāḍī): Turning staircase minaret built against part of the southern wall of the prayer hall and the west wall of the forecourt, rising away from the prayer hall. This minaret is now disused.

I do not count as staircase minarets the flights of steps that lead from the forecourt to the roof from which the call to prayer is made, in the Furdani mosque, the Masjid Kokoni (Malindi quarter), and elsewhere; and in numerous other mosques the call to prayer is made from a slightly raised terrace or from the doorway.¹⁷ But in the whole of Zanzibar Town there are only three mosques provided with minaret towers, as far as I have been able to find out. One of these is the Great Mosque, which has a low, octagonal minaret tower built onto its southeast corner; formerly, the call to prayer was made from the roof, and the minaret was built in 1950 when the original roof was converted into a covered terrace to accommodate the overflow. Of the two other mosques with minaret towers, one, built in 1250 A.H., as a building inscription informs us, is generally called Masjid al-Manāra, after that unusual feature.

Chake Chake, Pemba, Ibāḍī Mosque:

¹⁷ This will presumably also have been the case in a number of mosques of medieval style which are now in ruins.

Turning staircase minaret built against part of the south wall and the east wall of the forecourt, culminating in a small lantern on the southeast corner of the prayer hall, with openings facing north.

Pangani, Masjid Mwana Sukali: Short staircase minaret, not reaching roof level, in the southeast corner of the forecourt, which for reasons of space is situated to the east of the prayer hall (*fig. 4*).

Pangani, former Mosque of the Maymans, now Shāfi'i: Short staircase minaret outside, built in 1951; formerly, the call to prayer was made from the doorway.¹⁸

Bweini (opposite Pangani on the south bank of Pangani River), Masjid Diwāni Wambosasa: Staircase minaret built against the west wall of the forecourt; as this wall is very short, there are two flights of steps running in opposite directions, the second, higher one, leading to the southwest corner of the prayer hall.

Mombasa: I have not noticed any staircase minaret proper here; the Great Mosque (Jāmi' Bā Shaykh) and the Mandri Mosque (formerly Ibāḍī, now Shāfi'i, the oldest mosque of Mombasa) have minaret towers, and the Makadara Mosque (Baluchi, Ḥanafi) has a staircase which leads from the forecourt to the roof from where the call to prayer is made.

Malindi, Masjid Sālim b. Khalfān (Ibāḍī); (reconstructed about the middle of the nineteenth century on the ruins of an earlier mosque): In the forecourt there are, against the western wall, a minaret staircase which does not give access to the roof, and against the east wall, a utilitarian staircase which leads to the roof.¹⁹

¹⁸ The present Great Mosque, built about 1895, has a minaret tower; the site of the former Great Mosque is now an open space, with no trace of the previous building.

¹⁹ A second Ibāḍī mosque which I could not enter, called Masjid 'Alī b. Nūr after a grocer in the neigh-

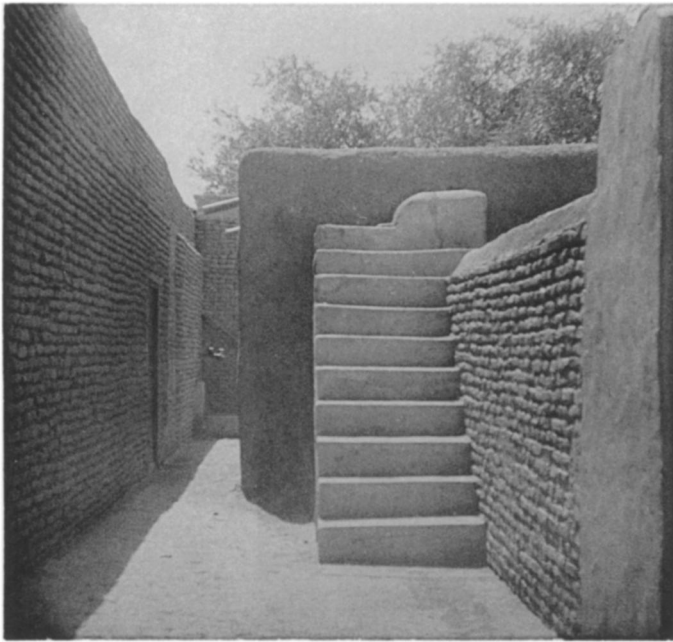


FIG. 1.—OMDURMAN, HOUSE OF THE KHALĪFA 'ABDALLĀH,
STAIRCASE MINARET.



FIG. 2.—BAGAMOYO, GREAT MOSQUE, STAIRCASE MINARET.



FIG. 3.—KILOMO, WOODEN LADDER SERVING AS A MINARET.



FIG. 4.—PANGANI, MASJID MWANA SUKALI,
STAIRCASE MINARET.

Faza, in the Lamu archipelago: A photograph, which Mr. Kirkman allowed me to see, shows that this mosque, apparently of modern construction, has a flight of steps leading to its roof at the southeast corner from outside; the entrance to this flight of steps is through a small locked gatehouse, which shows that it

borhood, has a small minaret lantern on the southeast corner of the prayer hall, and therefore presumably a staircase minaret.—The Shela Mosque (Shāfi‘i) has a flight of steps that leads from the forecourt to the roof from which the call to prayer is made.—The Great Mosque of Mambrūi, eight miles north-northeast of Malindi (dated 1297 A.H.), has along the outside of its *qibla* wall a flight of steps leading up to the roof, from which the call to prayer is made.

is meant as a staircase minaret and not as a utilitarian staircase.²⁰

This wide distribution of the staircase minaret obviates the necessity of looking for a special reason for its survival in any given region (excepting special cases such as that of northern Nigeria); it is an archaic feature of Islamic religious architecture which has survived, especially in remote and isolated districts, the demands of urban and metropolitan fashion which have succeeded in identifying, in the minds of most observers, the idea of minaret with that of a tower.

²⁰ For another example of controlling access to an outside staircase minaret, see *Ars Islamica*, vol. 5, p. 53 and fig. 5.