

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-51

2 Dana Place
Seventh & Selous
Harare, Zimbabwe
July 3, 1982

Zanzibar

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

Few names evoke in me the same feelings of mystery and enchantment as does Zanzibar. The known history of the island goes back almost 1,300 years. The people then were farmers and fishermen living in mud huts, but already they had established the trading contacts that would make the island famous, for archeologists have found fragments of pottery from Arabia and Persia dating to that period. The monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean blew the dows of the Arabian and Indian peninsulas along the East African coast during the northern winter and back in the summer, as they do still today. The ships came at first mainly in search of gold and ivory from the interior and tortoise shell from the coast. As the trade increased in value, merchants settled on the coastal islands. From this mix of Arabs, Indians and Persians with the African stock came a distinct culture and language—Swahili. The island that was the focus of this Muslim civilization took its name from the Arabic words for the original people and their region: Zanj-Bar, the coast of the Zanj.

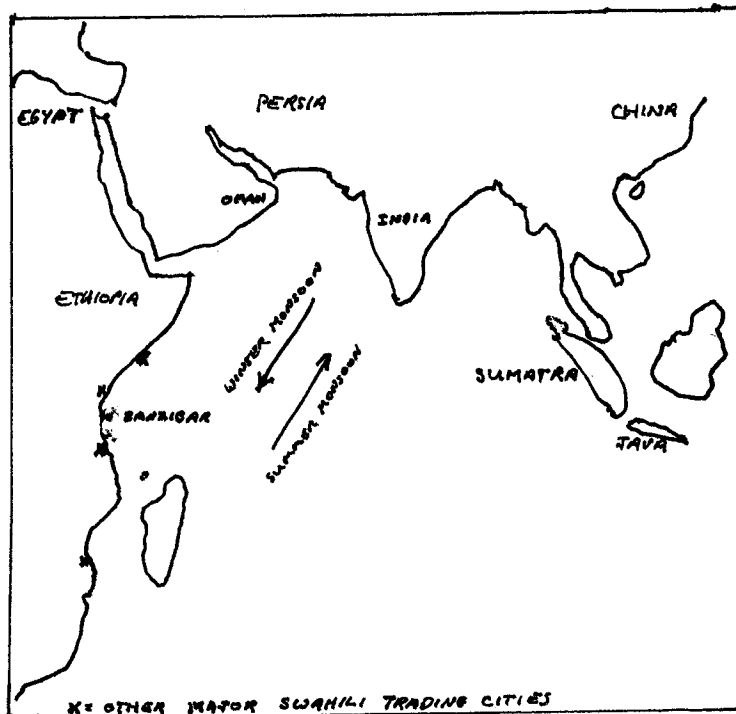
The Swahili cities acquired grace and opulence that surprised their first European visitors, who arrived around 1500. A Portuguese merchant described Zanzibar and neighboring Pemba at that time as "very fertile islands, with plenty of food: rice, millet, and fish, and abundant oranges and lemons... There are people in these islands who live in great luxury and comfort. They dress in good clothes of silk and cotton which they buy in Mombasa from the Cambay [Indian] merchants who live there. Their wives wear many jewels of gold from Sofala, and silver chains, earrings, bracelets and rings, and they dress in silk."

The Portuguese wanted this wealth for themselves. With superior ships and weapons, they savagely fell on the Swahili cities and captured them, but succeeded only in drying up the commerce that created the riches. The Swahili civilization went into a decline that lasted 200 years, and it never regained its previous splendor. In the eighteenth century, the coast came under the domination of Oman, on the southern end of Arabia. The gold trade gave way to the sale of slaves for plantations

Bowden Quinn is an Overseas Journalism Fellow of the Institute studying socialism in southern Africa.

on islands farther off the African coast and in the Americas. Zanzibar became the center of this trade, buying and selling tens of thousands of captives from the mainland every year by the middle of the nineteenth century.

In 1840, an Omani sultan, Sayyid Said, moved his court to Zanzibar, which was again the hub of East African commerce, its influence reaching as far as the great lakes a thousand miles from the coast. Said established his capital at the present site of the city of Zanzibar, and he introduced the cultivation of cloves, which became the island's major export after the slave trade was stopped by the British at the end of the nine-



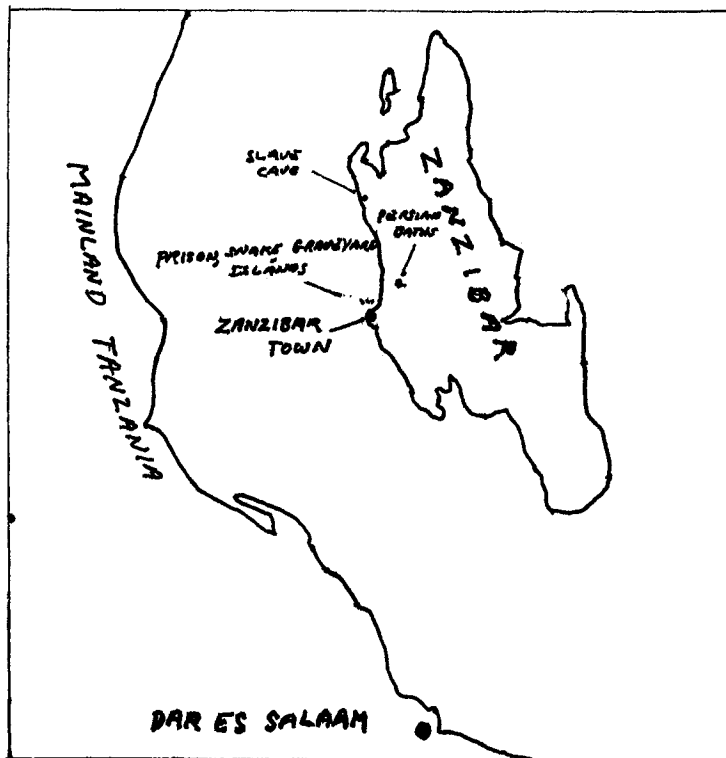
Major Indian Ocean trading states in 13th century*

teenth century and the ivory trade had diminished. The British made Zanzibar a protectorate in 1890, but the sultans retained their authority until 1963. In that year, a month after Britain gave Zanzibar its independence, the people revolted against the ruling class. The following year the country joined with Tanganyika on the mainland to form the United Republic of Tanzania.

Regular air service to the island takes 20 minutes from Dar-es-Salaam, but the adventurous, as well as the economical, go by sea. The passenger ship isn't running at present, but for \$10 a traveler can make the three-hour voyage aboard a freighter. The boat leaves only once a week, so it is a bit crowded. At my scheduled departure time of noon, a crush of humanity swarmed up and down the gangplank, waving documents and tickets at overwhelmed officials, tossing tons of baggage over the gunwales and

*The map and the synopsis of Zanzibar's past are taken from The Growth of African Civilisation: East and Central Africa to the late Nineteenth Century, Basil Davidson, et al; Longman, London 1967.

taking up desired positions along the rail. Half an hour later the flow thinned enough to risk boarding. I picked my way over legs, sleeping infants, cardboard boxes and straw baskets to a clearing on the top deck above the wheelhouse. This space was empty because it was off limits, but as more harried, pale-skinned travelers found their way to it, like foam rising to the



top of a glass of dark beer, an exception was made. None of us felt so guilty by this racial discrimination to descend into the swarm below. Gradually, some of the other passengers came up to join us.

We had come from all over: two Finns and a Swede were just off a plane from **Scandinavia**; three **Australians** had started six months before in Mauritius but still had completed less than a third of their trip across the continent from south to north; an American woman had gone to Somalia on an Agency for International Development contract as a family-planning economist and, finding the Somalis weren't "ready" for her, decided to explore the countries to the south. She traveled with two British women. Two Germans, man and woman, traveled separately. They all had been on the road a long time. The only people in the group who hadn't, besides the Scandinavians, were four Dutch, two of whom taught at a technical school in mainland Tanzania, with two others who could properly be called tourists.

The boat departed about 5:30. As we chugged up the coast, an orange sun sank into the smoke of a cement factory overlooking the beach hotels that serve as weekend playgrounds and extended temporary housing for Dar's expatriate community. The ship overtook a school of leaping dolphins as darkness closed in. The moon rose an hour later. Low over the bow was the Big Dipper; high above the stern, the Southern Cross.

During the passage, we got our passports stamped and health cards checked for entry into Zanzibar. The island and the mainland have separate customs and immigration services. Even Tanzanians need to have their travel documents approved. The "United Republic" is mostly for foreign display. The island has a separate government, with its own president and legislature, though Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere is head of state. The island's economy is merged with that of the mainland, but it has a separate budget.

Descending for the immigration procedure, I felt I might have been on the tramp steamer full of pilgrims that commenced the doom of Conrad's Lord Jim. People and their belongings were packed everywhere on the chilly afterdeck and in the stifling interior of the ship. The boat was a sea disaster waiting to happen, with at least 500 passengers and only two lifeboats that I could see.

Most of us who had assembled on the top deck found ourselves together again at the Malindi Guest House, the best of the town's cheap lodgings at \$7.50 a night. The next morning, awakened by the cry of a muezzin calling the faithful to prayer, I was out on the waterfront before sunrise. Boatmen setting out lifted the large triangular sail of a dow, spread between two spars lashed to the mast so the canvas can billow out over the bow in a following wind. Night fishermen were bringing in their catch. One had landed a ray, two feet across at the tips of its wings. He pointed to where his ankle had been lashed by the barbed, three-foot tail, which another man was severing at the base. I recalled reading years ago in a James Bond story, set in the Seychelle Islands a little farther out in the Indian Ocean, that the natives use the tail as a whip to discipline recalcitrant wives. One long-remembered xenophobic myth sank with the tail as the fisherman threw it back into the sea.

That day the Scandinavians and I hired a taxi for \$65 to show us some sights north of the city. First stop was the tourist office, where we paid a dollar a head for permission to leave the city. Such permission is needed for just about any activity on Zanzibar except walking around the city. It is given out routinely, and I think the authorities merely hit upon it as the easiest way to get some revenue from tourists without going to a lot of bother.

We visited a coral grotto known as the slave cave, into which captives from the African interior were kept until lifted out for sale at the slave market in town, a practice that lasted almost up to the beginning of this century. The thought of this dark chamber of jagged rock and dripping water filled with people uprooted from their homes, not knowing what was in store for them, impressed upon me the horror of slavery more effectively than many old prisons with shackles on walls and floors have done.

We also went to some Persian baths built in 1850 by Sultan Said for his Iranian wife. They, like the slave cave, were on an unmarked dirt road. Bushes grew all around, and the marble walls were black with mold and grime. The beauty of the interior ornamentation could only be guessed at from the white outline of the work. Zanzibar's decision not to grovel for the tourist trade is admirable, but I sympathized with the taxi driver's complaint about the neglect of the baths, though his is

not an unbiased opinion. I suppose there's no middle ground; it's either moss-grown monuments or gaudy hotels on the beach.

Most of the taxi ride was a botanical tour. Though Zanzibar is called the clove island (providing, with Pemba, four-fifths of the world's cloves), everywhere I looked were banana trees towered over by coconut palms. We stopped to see how the local people prepare copra. They husk the coconuts and dry the meat in large pits over a fire. The dried meat—copra—is sold to government factories to be rendered into oil. The shells may be sold for use in the manufacture of Formica, but it's also used as fuel. Three half-shells sell for a shilling (about 10 cents), which seemed expensive to me. I asked the driver how much cooking a family could do with a shilling's worth of shells. He, no fool, said it depended upon the size of their pot, but he laughed at the price and said kerosene was cheaper. Kerosene is often unavailable, however. I've seen long lines of plastic jugs and metal cans instead of cars snaking out of gas stations as people waited for a consignment of kerosene to go on sale.

The coconut husks are buried in beach sand for four months, when they are pliable enough to make into rope. The fronds of the utilitarian coconut tree provide the thatch for roofing.

The variety of the island's spices fascinated me. Cloves are unopened flower buds. Cardamom seeds come from nodules on roots growing above ground from a reedlike plant. Black pepper grows in small, pendulous clusters on a climbing vine resembling ivy. Cinnamon comes from the bark of a tree, and nutmeg is a fruit kernel.

In addition, we saw coffee and cocoa, citronella, grapefruit, lemons, mangoes, oranges, pineapples and papayas, cassava, corn, rice, sweet potatoes and yams.

This verdant island is surrounded by a jade sea, which also provides an abundant harvest. The wharf below the guest house had great piles of small, silvery fish every morning, and baskets of kingfish, octopus and squid. Three islets with the menacing names of Graveyard, Snake and Prison guard the harbor of Zanzibar. Graveyard has the burial places of many British seamen, dating to the early nineteenth century. Snake Island is said to be also appropriately named; I didn't attempt to verify this. Prison Island was intended but purportedly never used as a private detention grounds for the slaves of a wealthy Zanzibar Arab. During colonial times, the island was a quarantine station. The small, former hospital has a large verandah from which daytrippers can look at the city's buildings washed to a sparkling white by the sun. The island's inhabitants put up with these visitations from picnickers with grim forbearance. They are giant tortoises, and perhaps the banana skins and orange peels that the visitors discard are compensation for the seemingly irresistible human urge to ride these harmless beasts.

The island's other attractions are its sandy beach and the coral reef that encircles it. Underwater is a Cousteau world of color and mystery. Fish of every shape and hue flicker around the bizarre coral growths. Sea urchins—lovely, dangerous, black stars—and pink sea anemones, tentacles waving like fields of grain in a wind, offer their poisons to the unwary. Everything seems more colorful than in colder seas. Clams, a foot or more in diameter, expose green or orange flesh. I saw a huge

lobster with bright yellow legs and an eel spotted like an artist's palette.

Almost as mysterious, and colorful in another sense, were the zigzag alleyways of Zanzibar Town. The older section of the city is a maze of these narrow paths cutting through dark canyons of three-story buildings. In six days and nights of wandering, I never found my bearings. Trying to pass from north to east, I emerged on the western side; plunging in at the southern end intending to go straight across, I found myself ten minutes later back out a hundred yards from where I had started. Night forays were especially disconcerting. A few streets were lit by bright orange electric lights, others had pale white bulbs, in some a lantern glowed from a window or storefront, while many were in darkness. The lighting had no pattern, no well-lit thoroughfare crossed the old town, though they encircled it.

Finding a place to eat was a problem. Health officials had closed the restaurants recently because of a spate of illness. The island has a history of cholera outbreaks, but this crackdown was the result of an increase in dysentery cases. Only a few places had been inspected and approved to reopen, or had paid a bribe to carry on business in their usual fashion. Looking for these was a nightly adventure. From a lonely passage, I would come upon a crowded intersection. Thinking I had at last found the city's heart, I'd join the throng walking down a wide street, only to find myself alone after a few steps, the crowd dispersed into dark side ways and the street ended in another dim path that seemed to lead nowhere. Yet I knew other corners, just as lively, were somewhere nearby, for the city was only about a mile square.

In few other cities would I venture down unknown paths at night so fearlessly. Zanzibar has a reputation for friendliness and honesty that seemed well deserved.

I tried to establish landmarks, but it was hopeless. I would come upon a tumbledown building I thought I recognized, the mud bricks dissolved into a reddish-orange mound covered with weeds. Five minutes later, I'd come upon another that looked just the same. Wandering in the city was like being in a Fellini version of the Arabian Nights. Strange sights reinforced the feeling of unreality bred by my disorientation.

One night I passed a large building, perhaps a mosque, whose great wooden doors stood open. At the end of a cavernous hall, a silhouette stirred the contents of a large bowl set over a blazing fire. An eerie sight, but I had talked with a man who tended a pot of similar shape. He was making sweets, and I assumed the figure in the mosque was doing the same. Perhaps the activity was linked to the upcoming month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast during the day. So I went away not too amazed by the sight. I was only astonished when, after walking for another quarter hour, I passed the door again from the same direction, the fire still burning but the figure gone. At least, I assume it was the same door.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn