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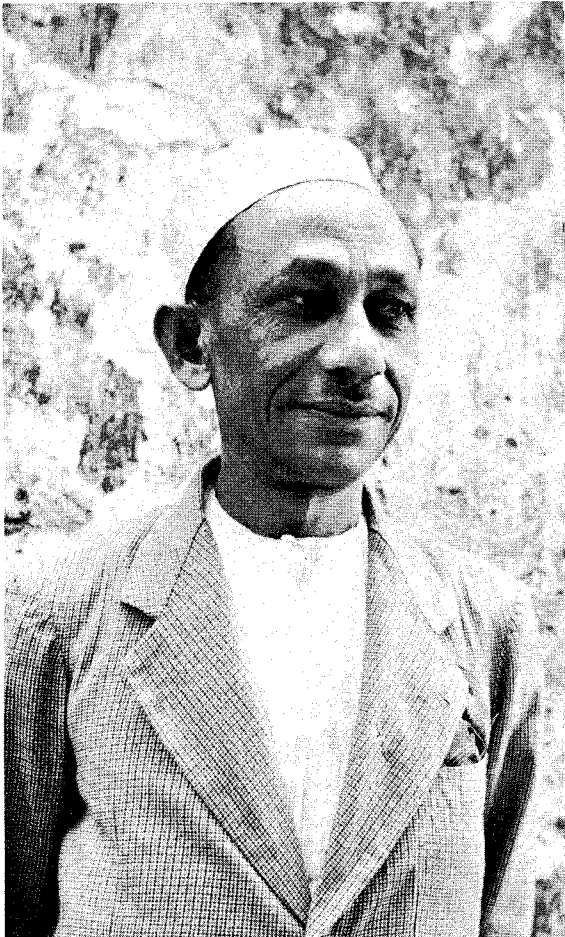
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Zanzibar Arabs - II
People and Prospects

September 10, 1954
c/o Barclays Bank
Queensway
Nairobi, Kenya

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The strong nationalist wind whipping across Zanzibar has picked up recruits in the haphazard way that the desert gale picks up clouds of dust in Oman. To the cause have flocked wealthy landowners, prosperous merchants, poor shamba keepers with only a few acres, lowly coffee vendors, the young and the old, the royalty and the commoners. Even some Arab government officials, forbidden to engage in politics, give private encouragement to the others.



Amour Zahor el Ismaili,
in kofia, kanzu and
western sports jacket

It is a diverse group and it has a diverse assortment of leaders. One is a man you might least expect to find in a movement of this sort, Amour Zahor el Ismaili, retired Chief Inspector, Zanzibar Police.

Amour Zahor is in his early 50s and has seven children. He joined the police as a young man and served for 29 years. He was due for promotion to the rank of Assistant Superintendent when he retired. Now he keeps himself busy looking after his clove plantation. Clove growing is not too exacting an occupation though and Amour Zahor often rides his bicycle over to Ali Muhsin's house in the mornings for a cup of coffee and a chat.

In appearance, Amour Zahor is every bit the watchful detective. He is short but wiry and has hawk-like features, topped off by a tiny mustache. Although he talks in a low, calm voice, he gives the impression of missing nothing. On weekdays he wears western dress and a fez and on Fridays, the "Sunday" of the Muslim world, he goes about in a kofia, a white, embroidered skull cap, and a kanzu, a long, white cotton smock reaching down to the ankles.

Fellow Arabs say that Amour Zahor was such a devoted cop that he would have arrested his own mother if she had ever stepped out

of line. He spent his time on the force as a fingerprint expert and later as a sleuth in the investigations branch. One gets the idea that not a whit of evidence ever went unnoticed. Amour Zahor can cite the date for every move that was taken in the sedition case. "The summonses were served on us on 21 May, citing Sections so and so of the Penal Decree," he will intone in response to a question. One time when I asked him when Rankine left, he replied matter-of-factly, "1 June, 9 p.m."

It is not often that Amour Zahor's memory fails him. But then he has only to consult his notebook. It is rumored that everything that ever happened in Zanzibar is recorded there. Friends maintain that Amour Zahor even puts down the serial numbers of all bank notes that come into his possession.

Habits acquired from 29 years of sleuthing are not abandoned quickly, and Amour Zahor would never dream of sitting with his back to a door. One time when I was walking down a street with him on the way to a photo shop, he suddenly flagged down a passing car driven by an Indian. "Would you give us a lift to the photo shop, please?" he said. Amour Zahor was silent as we drove along, then thanked the Indian politely when we got out. Later Amour Zahor said, "The reason I stopped that car is that the Indian is a police informer. I wanted him to know where we were going so he wouldn't come up with some fantastic report about where I was taking you."

Other Arabs told me that inasmuch as Amour Zahor had just been elected to the Executive Committee at the time the articles were appearing in Al Falag, he might have been able to plead lack of knowledge and thus escape prosecution. "But he insisted on standing trial with us," one of the defendants said. "In fact he was the most determined of us all. He wanted to fight the case through to a finish."

Like the retired schoolteacher, Amour Zahor receives a government pension. It might be thought that he would be afraid of losing it. But Amour Zahor is no stranger to the law. "Even if the conviction does stand on appeal, it was a technical offense," he says, getting his arguments ready.

How did Amour Zahor get involved in the cause? I wondered. After all, a cop is a cop. So I asked him about it and he did not hesitate in coming up with a characteristic terse reply: "No one is happy being ruled by anyone else. We've got no real freedom here---it's only nominal. If you criticize anything, you're charged with sedition."

One time, while walking in the bazaar with Amour Zahor, I stopped at an Indian duka to buy a notebook. I asked the Indian the price. "Just a minute, excuse me, please," Amour Zahor said, stepping in front of me. "You are a guest in Zanzibar; you cannot pay for anything. Ali Muhsin would be very angry with me if you did." I thanked him but said I would pay. "You can't---the Indian won't take your money," Amour Zahor said.

Amour Zahor peered commandingly at the Indian over the top of his spectacles. "No, I won't take your money," the Indian muttered meekly. He said the price was 2 1/2 shillings (35 cents). Amour Zahor gave him 2 shillings and we left. "If he'd have said 2 shillings, I'd have given him 1 1/2," Amour Zahor said. "These Indians overcharge on everything."

I asked Amour Zahor once if there is any Communism among the Arabs. "Can landowners be Communists?" he said, dismissing the subject with an abrupt wave of the hand, as if he were hurrying along a bum found loitering in front of the Palace.

Sheikh Abdulla Suleiman el Harthi, the 70-year-old president of the Arab Association, is one of the most respected men in Zanzibar. Some of the Arab indignation about the sedition case no doubt stems from the fact that Sheikh Abdulla was prosecuted. As it was, he received as much, if not more, respect than did the judge. Whenever Sheikh Abdulla entered or left the courtroom, the spectators all rose. One afternoon, as the hearing continued to wear on, Sheikh Abdulla told a European policeman that he had to leave for prayers. "Can't you wait just a half an hour?" the policeman said. "Prayers do not wait for anything," Sheikh Abdulla thundered in reply. The policeman sent a note to the judge, who shook his head, smiled and granted permission for the defendant to leave.



Sheikh Abdulla

In appearance, Sheikh Abdulla looks like a desert chieftan. He has a regal air and it is enhanced by his long, snowy white beard. He walks very erectly, converses in an air of great ease and outdoes even his fellow Arabs in politeness and charm. He speaks no English and is not as fluent in Kiswahili as the locally-born Arabs. Arabic is his language and he spoke only that until he came to Zanzibar from Oman as a young man. He wears a desert turban and a kanzu; never western dress. On special occasions, he wears his robe over the kanzu.

The el Harthi in his name denotes his tribe in Oman---el ("the") Harthy. In Zanzibar, the final "y" is changed to "i." The el Harthy are one of the independent tribes in the desert who acknowledge the suzerainty of the Sultan, in Muscat, the chief town, only as it suits them. Sheikh Abdulla has two wives, one son and a number of daughters. "We don't talk about how many daughters a man has," says Ali Muhsin. "We feel that's a man's private business." This attitude extends to census takers as well and it is sometimes suspected that the Arab population of the Protectorate is considerably more than the reported 44,000.

As one of the most respected men in Zanzibar, Sheikh Abdulla is frequently named in wills as the trustee of estates. Some Arabs who have returned to Oman have also left land in his care. As a result, Sheikh Abdulla either owns or manages more than 100 plantations and is quite wealthy. His standing in the community results, too, in frequent invitations for him to mediate in land and family disputes. He listens gravely as both sides present their case, then, in a quiet voice, goes about patching up the matter.

Back in the 1930s, he helped end an Arab riot. A policeman and a European administrative officer had been killed by the rioters, who were armed with swords and daggers. Sheikh Abdulla, alone and unarmed, walked into their midst and urged them to disperse. One man shouted that Sheikh Abdulla was "pro-government" and should be killed. Sheikh Abdulla pulled open his kanzu, exposing his bare chest and told them to strike if they dared. The rioters dispersed sheepishly.

His standing in Zanzibar is such that (at least according to one story) he once was able to commandeer the Sultan's bright red limousine. As the story goes, Sheikh Abdulla was taking £700 (nearly \$2,000) in small change to a plantation to pay off the clove pickers. He got onto a bus and put the money, which was in two bags, under the seat. When he got to his destination, he alighted, leaving the bags on the bus. The bus was gone when he realized that he had left the money aboard. The spot was near one of the Sultan's country palaces and just then the Sultan came along in his limousine. Sheikh Abdulla flagged him down, told him what had happened and asked if he could borrow the car. The Sultan obligingly got out and walked to his palace while Sheikh Abdulla tore after the bus. The money was still there.

One time I had occasion to appreciate Sheikh Abdulla's social graces. I was invited to have coffee one afternoon with an Arab who lives near Sheikh Abdulla. One of Ali Muhsin's servants went along to show me the way. He took me to a large stone house and told the servant that I had come to have coffee with the Bwana. The servant went upstairs and informed his master to that effect, then returned and showed me into a sitting room. I sat down to wait. Soon Sheikh Abdulla appeared, greeting me cordially. I figured that he too had been invited to the coffee session and wondered why the host was late. Coffee and fruit were served and we chatted for fully half an hour in Kiswahili. Then Sheikh Abdulla, hesitating and very apologetic, said, "I must go to the mosque now; it is time for prayers." I nodded and said it was nice to have seen him. He looked bewildered. Then, cursing Ali Muhsin's servant, I realized that I was in Sheikh Abdulla's house, not in the house of the man who had invited me. Embarrassed, I explained it to Sheikh Abdulla. Ever the gracious host, he quickly retrieved the situation by exclaiming: "But this is your house, too! It is only proper that you came here!"

Not all of my visits to Sheikh Abdulla's house were inadvertent, though. On the morning of Idd-el-Haj, the holiday of the pilgrimage to Mecca, or Siku Kuu, "The Big Day," as it is called in Kiswahili, I accompanied Ali Muhsin when he went to pay his respects to Sheikh Abdulla. The narrow street in front of Sheikh Abdulla's house was crowded with Arab men and boys who had come for the same purpose. They greeted each other with great cordiality. Then we pushed through the crowd and into the house, which was jammed with fathers and sons. The old man spotted us and rose with regal dignity to extend his hand. He bade us sit next to him.

There was little conversation at the gathering other than polite exchanges. As each man arrived or departed, all would stand up as a mark of courtesy, Sheikh Abdulla included. The newcomer would always pass down the line of standing men, solemnly shaking hands with each of them. Then Sheikh Abdulla would bid everyone to sit down. Five seconds later we would be up again at a new arrival or departure. Young boys would kiss their elders' hands.

Several nimble-footed servants ran back and forth. First they served a taffy-like sweet. This was followed by tiny cups of black coffee. Then they brought almond ade. After about 10 minutes, Ali Muhsin and I took our leave. "Come back Thursday morning at 10:30 and then we can talk politics," Sheikh Abdulla said.

At the appointed time, we returned. He greeted us ceremoniously and led us to a second floor living room. Following the Arab custom, he and Ali Muhsin kicked off their sandals before stepping onto the Persian rug. Amour Zahor joined us. Then Sheikh Abdulla, seated in an easy chair, said:

"We have not been satisfied with the way the government has treated us. When anything is passed which is contrary to the people's desire and when the people object, the government says, 'You had your representatives in Legco and they passed it.'

"But those representatives are powerless, even if they had the will to object. Because of the constant frustration of the so-called representative in Legco and because of the feeling that he is getting nowhere, his power of resistance tones down. Ultimately he becomes the type of man who would agree with everything the government proposes.

"On the other hand, his people begin to lose confidence in him. They think he is just a government man. In choosing Legco members from the panels of names submitted by our associations, government also tends to choose the man likely to cause the least opposition in the council.

"The authorities, too, don't carry out seriously any attempt to teach Arabic in the schools. The best man to teach Arabic is one to whom Arabic is the mother tongue. But they will only employ a local person, one who usually has only a smattering of knowledge of Arabic. The sensible thing would be to bring teachers from the Arab countries, just as teachers of English were brought from England, but they don't want to do that.

"We used to have two kadhīs (Muslim civil judges), one of the Sunni sect and one of the Ibadhi sect of Islam. The Ibadhi died and we wanted a replacement. Now Ibadhi scholars are few here, so we suggested that someone be gotten from Oman. The government said, though, that this would be contrary to the policy of appointing only His Highness' subjects to the post, that a kadhi must know Kiswahili and that there are capable men here.

"But Oman and Zanzibar are practically one country. The present Sultan was born in Muscat and came here as a young man. Anyway our present chief kadhi was not born in Zanzibar. He is a British protected person from the Hadhramaut and was naturalized only last week. It is not necessary, either, that a kadhi know Kiswahili. The European magistrates all use interpreters even if they know Kiswahili. And there are no qualified men here.

"Our feeling is that it is an attempt to degrade the post of kadhi. When you appoint an ignorant person, you further degrade the post and that gives you an excuse to degrade it still further. Already the kadhis have very little of the power they used to have."

Ali Muhsin, who had been helping my Kiswahili over the rough spots by translating Sheikh Abdulla's words, departed from the translation to add a few words of his own. "We think it's an attempt to destroy the Arab culture in Zanzibar," he said. He recalled that a former British Resident had told the Arabs that he had it on the authority of the Colonial Secretary to say that Zanzibar was an Arab State and that it would be on the Arabic language and Arabic culture that the future self-government of Zanzibar would be based.

Sheikh Abdulla continued:

"The truth is that what the Attorney General said in court---that we liked to consider ourselves the leading community and that we should be given the severest penalty---sums up the whole attitude of the government toward us.

"It is difficult to say if we will win this fight. Our determination is great, but the voice of the government is greater. They have a powerful propaganda machinery---District Commissioners, Mudirs and Shehas (local administrative officers), who go about spreading propaganda against our cause.

"They threaten people that what we say is seditious and that we preach revolution and that those who take part will be deported to Arabia. The spread fear in the hearts of the people. The worst thing about their propaganda is that they tell the people that we don't want the Sultan. Why, he's everything to us. Everything. But that is the kind of poison they spread.

"So, who will succeed? Nobody knows. But our determination is there."

At this writing, the Arabs have been out of the government for three months. The British are no haughty masters and it appears that the government wants to effect a settlement. Already some informal talks have been held to find out just what the Arabs want. As one official indicated, government has adopted a flexible attitude toward the situation. As elsewhere, the British want to rule more or less in harmony, with something approximating good will existing among the local people. Even if that were not the case, it would be difficult in the long run to continue to administer an acknowledged Arab Sultanate without the cooperation of the Arabs. The Arabs though are in no hurry to effect a settlement; they are awaiting the outcome of the appeal from the sedition convictions.

Arab leaders realize full well the value of the case as a unifying factor and one has said jokingly, "The worst thing that could happen is that we might win the appeal." It was said as a joke, but the truth has not escaped them. The Arabs seem to be united almost to a man; previously there had been little but quarrels among them. At the same time some of the nationalists refer to Rankine as a "godsend." "He taught us not to rely on the forbearance of our masters," Ali Muhsin says.

For their part, the British officials are not opposed to elections. They raised the issue of introducing them before, but the idea did not get an enthusiastic response from the unofficials. The Arabs at one time disapproved of communal (racial) rolls, but feared the common roll at that time. One government official said privately that he would like to see common roll elections introduced at the Town Council level and later extended to Legco.

The way seems clear for early elections in Zanzibar. But the unofficial majority and the member system might not come so soon. Whether the Arabs would go back if the common roll were introduced for Legco, but not an unofficial majority or the member system, remains to be seen. Talks with the government have not reached that stage and one gets the impression the Arabs have not given serious thought to that possibility.

While the Arabs are united in their demands, there are other people in Zanzibar who have doubts about common roll elections, an unofficial majority or self-government at this time. One consideration is how do the Africans and the Indians fit into the scheme of things?

The Africans, with nearly 200,000 reported in the 1948 census, outnumbered the Arabs by almost five to one. The great majority of Africans in the Protectorate call themselves Shirazis and regard themselves as the descendants of early Persian settlers. The ties between them and the Arabs in religion and culture and through intermarriage have been mentioned earlier. The Arabization of the Shirazis even extends to their forms of greeting. "Waarabu, hamjambo?" ("Arabs, you have no concerns?") a Shirazi will say on approaching a group of men. They consider it impolite to mention women directly, so when they want to send greetings to the womenfolk, they say, "Tusalimiye waarabu nyumbani" ("Give greetings to the Arabs at home.")

A number of Shirazis openly sympathize with the Arabs in their present dispute with the government. Others, it appears, do so tacitly. Yet there are those among them who are reluctant to see common roll voting or self-government at this time. They fear they are not sufficiently advanced to cope with the Arabs in the political arena. Among the mainland Africans, there seems to be little or no sympathy for the Arabs. They are a small group and many have come to Zanzibar only to work for a short time.

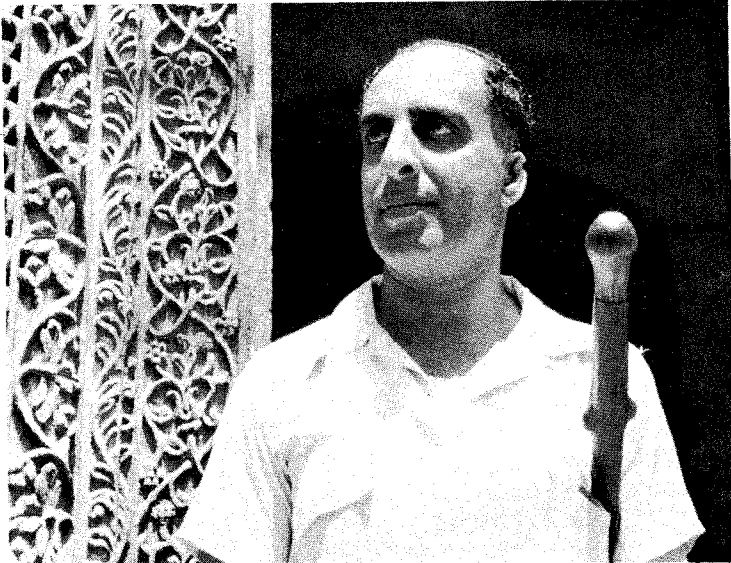
Neither is there much sympathy among the Indians, another small group. Leaders of both the Indian Muslims and the Hindus, fearful of Arab domination, say they are opposed to both the common roll and self-government at this time. The Indian Muslims number about 11,000 and the Hindus about 4,000. There is quite a lot of fighting between them.

If one is permitted a guess in these matters, mine would be that the interests of the Africans would not suffer by self-government or the common roll in Zanzibar. Racial politics have to end sometime and the longer they continue, the more difficult it is to end them. As it is, there is a great deal of harmony, mutual interests and common cultural orientation between the Arabs and the Shirazis. Perhaps no other two races in East Africa get along quite as well. Whatever fears the Shirazis have of being outsmarted by the Arabs should be weighed against a recognition of their numerical advantage.

As far as the Indians are concerned, it is not too difficult to sympathize with the Arabs when they say that the Indians will just have to adjust to conditions in the country of their at least temporary adoption.

A strong argument in favor of British colonial rule is that it puts people in a position where they can rule themselves in a democratic way,

with reasonable efficiency, and at the same time cope effectively with the other nations of the world. When that stage is reached is hard to say. Some people learn to swim by being thrown into deep water. Some just drown. The British official argues that his countrymen have not labored all these years just to have the local people make a "mess" of it.



"Self-Government!"---
Ahmed Seif el Kharusi,
Sedition Trial Defendant
and Co-Owner of Mwongozi,
With Formidable Walking
Stick

In Zanzibar there has come into existence an educated class among the Arabs and, to a lesser extent, among the Africans. Many Arabs now hold important posts in the colonial government---they include two District Commissioners, an Information Officer, a Labor Officer, three Assistant District Officers and a Secretariat Officer. Some Africans hold responsible jobs as well. Zanzibar is not without trained local administrators.

The streets of Zanzibar ring with many voices. The Arab cries for self-government. One African sides with him; another expresses doubts. The Indian opposes it vigorously. The Britisher says the nationalists are too impatient.

"Impatient?" says Ali Muhsin, with a laugh. "Why, we've been accused of being the only country in the world that doesn't want self-government!"

Sincerely,

David E. Reed

David E. Reed