

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Zanzibar II
Arab Nationalist

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(From Zanzibar)

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The average Arab one meets in Zanzibar is a charming and thoroughly unhurried fellow. Western notions of haste, super-efficiency and change are not shared by him. Zanzibar is too hot for hurry and fuss and our Arab much prefers the gentle shade of the nearest tree or the lazy gossip of the local coffee house.

Life goes on for him in much the same way it did for his forefathers. He dresses in the old fashion---in the kanzu, the white cotton smock reaching to the ankles---and his education often does not consist of much more than learning the verses of the Holy Koran. He looks with suspicion on any innovation. "Who can contest Allah's inscrutable will?"

Among Zanzibar's Arabs, though, there is a new and rising sort. They are what is sometimes referred to as the "awakening" Arabs. Strongly nationalistic in outlook and combining Western ideas of self-government with the cultural heritage of the East, they are sometimes a thorn in the side of Zanzibar's British rulers. Typical of these is a young man by the name of Sheikh Ali Muhsin Barwani.

Sheikh ("Mr.") Ali Muhsin lives in an old three-story stone house on one of Zanzibar's tiny, winding streets. The house is separated from its neighbor across the street by only a few arms-lengths. The street is too narrow for autos, but a constant stream of bicycles, pedestrians, handcarts and rickshaws more than compensate for any emptiness that otherwise might have resulted.

Ali Muhsin is a member of Zanzibar's Legislative Council and I first went to his house for a talk after reading an account in the Official Gazette of some questions he has been asking in the council.

At a recent session, he said:

"Does government consider the advisability of taking steps of returning the administration of His Highness' (the Sultan of Zanzibar's) mainland dominion to His Highness' government?"

The "dominion" in question---a 10-mile deep strip on the Kenya coast---was leased to the Kenya government in 1895 for the bargain price of £11,000 (\$30,800) a year. It now is one of Kenya's most prosperous areas.

It would be safe to assume that Ali Muhsin's question was not enthusiastically received by government. At any rate, R. E. Alford, Chief Secretary or Number Two man in the government, replied to Ali Muhsin:

"No, Sir. The government does not consider that it would be in the best interest of Zanzibar to raise this question."

Ali Muhsin had another question as well---one that became rather vexatious in the Uganda Kingdom of Buganda. "Will the government," Ali Muhsin said, "be pleased to request Her Majesty's government to name a definite date when Her Majesty's government will be prepared to grant self-government to this Sultanate?"

Alford replied:

"No, Sir. Full responsible government is a relatively late stage in the process of political evolution which depends on a variety of factors, many of which clearly are not capable of pre-determination."

The hint that there were any nationalistic stirrings in this sleepy Sultanate came as a surprise to me and that was what led me to the finely-carved Arab door of Ali Muhsin's house.

Ali Muhsin was roused from his after-lunch nap and greeted me cordially in good English. We sat down in easy chairs in the huge second-floor living room of the house. The ceiling of the room was two stories high and a row of unglazed windows let in plenty of light and the cooling monsoon breeze. The room, as with all Arab homes, was sparsely furnished. Islam frowns on ornamentation and it is to be found only on the doors of Zanzibar. Ali Muhsin did have a small picture of the Sultan of Zanzibar hanging on one wall, though.

I apologized for the interruption and Ali Muhsin said: "No, no, don't apologize. I always like to talk about Zanzibar. If I talk too much and bore you, stop me."

So first we talked about his background.

Ali Muhsin is 34 years old, of short stature and he is putting on a little weight these days. He had an African greatgrandmother and he has a tan complexion, black wooly hair and Arab features. He wears European clothing, topped with a fez, and uses his Arab robes only for ceremonial occasions.

Ali Muhsin is anything but the grave, sinister and unfathomable Arab of popular conception. He is very cheerful and always smiling. One gets the impression that he may be a bit self-conscious. He speaks with enthusiasm, but in a low, calm voice. His ideas appear to be carefully thought out. Whatever the topic---Zanzibar's history, its agricultural problems, its economic set-up or what have you--- Ali Muhsin has very definite views on the subject.

He was born in Zanzibar. He comes from an old, influential family and his family tree reads like a history of this Sultanate. A grandfather of his was one of a group of Arabs who seized the Sultan's palace in 1896 in an attempt to install as Sultan a man of whom the British disapproved. The palace was surrendered after the British bombarded it from naval vessels. The British choice was installed as Sultan and the grandfather was fined heavily.

A greatgrandfather of Ali Muhsin's sided with the Sultan of Oman when the Sultanates of Oman and Zanzibar were divided in 1856. The Sultan of Zanzibar imprisoned him at Lamu on the mainland and he died while in prison. Ali Muhsin's family say he was poisoned.

Ali Muhsin studied agriculture at Makerere College in Uganda, which exists largely for Africans. He then visited England and the European Continent and returned to Zanzibar to become an assistant agricultural officer for the government.

Although Muslim law permits him to have four wives, he has only one. (All other Arabs I met have only one wife, too. "One is too many as it is," an Arab said glumly. Others say that polygamy is too expensive these days).

Ali Muhsin's four children have not learned English yet and he speaks to them in Swahili. His wife, who also comes from an old and influential family, lives, as he puts it, "half in and half out of purdah." Carrying their youngest child, she came out to shake hands with me, but when Arab men call at the home, she does not appear.

Ali Muhsin since has left the agricultural department. Now, in addition to his Legislative Council and committee work, he manages town property and country plantations for relatives. Lately he has been busy supervising the construction of a new home for his family near the sea shore.

He also publishes a weekly newspaper in Swahili and English called Mwongozi ("Guide"). "It could be translated 'leader,'" says Ali Muhsin, "but we don't like the fascist implication." Mwongozi is dedicated, Ali Muhsin says, "to a unity of all races in Zanzibar." He says the paper has been losing money, but that he continues to pick up the checks because of the importance of getting the view across.

Mwongozi consists of four pages, tabloid size. It is hard to distinguish editorials from news stories, but, as Ali Muhsin says, it is supposed to be a "journal of opinion." Crowded in with Koran teachings and ads from bazaar merchants are vigorous---and, government officials say, ill-informed---attacks on government policy in Zanzibar and elsewhere in East Africa.

The paper has taken a strong stand on the ousting of the Kabaka of Buganda and frequently criticizes the situation in Kenya. Zanzibar's British rulers, irritated by Mwongozi's needlings, have had Ali Muhsin in for a tongue-lashing, but the paper continues to blast away.

One of Ali Muhsin's colleagues on the paper is a keen-minded Arab nationalist named Seif Hamud Muhammad. He was born into the royal family as Seyyid Seif Hamud Muhammad and is one-quarter African. He since has renounced his royal tie. It was Seif Hamud's ancestors who are accused of poisoning Ali Muhsin's greatgrandfather.

Ali Muhsin regards the setting of a date for self-government as an important first step. "Setting a date is setting a target to work for," he said over cups of tea brought in by an African servant. "If we keep on waiting, this could never come to an end."

He said he was impressed by what he saw among his fellow Muslims in Somalia while attending a recent United Nations Association seminar in Mogadishu. (Somalia, a former Italian Colony, now is administered by the Italians as a United Nations Trust Territory. The Italians are due to leave in 1960.)

"In Somalia, the people have been awakened---and so has the government---in face of the target date," Ali Muhsin said. "The people are sending all the students they can abroad so that they will have the trained personnel for when the Italians leave. The date has forced the government to work on schedule. If you keep on waiting in colonies, the situation might never come to an end."

Ali Muhsin is no republican. He would like to see a Parliamentary Sultanate with the Sultan functioning as constitutional monarch. Zanzibar would be a Muslim state, incorporating the values of the East with "the best in the West." Foreign technicians probably would be needed at first, Ali Muhsin says.

Like many nationalists in East Africa, Ali Muhsin is financially well off and economic change does not figure into his views. He probably would defend the economic set-up with the same vigor that he opposes the political one.

"It's true that we've come some of the way toward self government in Zanzibar," he said, "but it's been a slow and painful process. It's got to come some day, so it might as well come without bitterness. We don't want to spend our tax money on expatriate officials. We want to run the country ourselves. We have to be given a trial and the experience."

A ten-year target date for self-government would be proper for Zanzibar, Ali Muhsin said.

The government's opposition to the idea of setting a date was shown by Alford's Legco reply. Disagreement between government and nationalist views does not end there, but continues right on down the line.

The nationalists demand at least a greater share in the power. The officials reply that the local people are consulted and that their views are taken into careful consideration in framing policy. To this Ali Muhsin says: "The trouble is, they don't take us into their confidence." He always uses the pronoun "they" in referring to government.

In the Legislative Council, where laws are enacted, there are nine ex-officio members, all government officials, and eight unofficials, chosen from the public. Ali Muhsin says the government, with its extra vote, pushes through any measure it wants. "We can't do a thing about it," he says.

Government officials dispute this and say no attempt is ever made to "steamroller" the unofficials. "If that were so, there wouldn't be any point in having the unofficials in the council," said P. Pullicino, Administrative Secretary. The purpose of having unofficial representation is to encourage debate and facilitate agreement as a step toward self-government, the officials say.

The unofficials have a majority in the Standing Finance Committee, where expenditures are discussed and approved. The government has the power to override a committee decision in Legco. "Normally, though," said Pullicino, "if the committee disagreed en bloc, government would drop the matter."

None of the unofficials is elected. All of them---two Africans, three Arabs, two Indians and one European---are appointed by the British Resident (who corresponds to a governor of a colony) from panels of names submitted by organizations representing the various races.

Though not elected---and this is an important consideration in British policy in East Africa---the unofficials are not necessarily "yes-men." Ali Muhsin in Zanzibar and some African members appointed to Kenya's Legco can be very strong critics of government policy.

Elections have been promised by the government. Ali Muhsin says with a cynical laugh: "Elections are always just around the corner." The British reply that agreement must first be reached on the method of representation. The issue is whether to have a common voting roll open to qualified persons of all races, or separate rolls for each race. Some Zanzibaris favor the one; some the other.

As Zanzibar is a Protectorate, the Sultan's solid-red flag flies over public buildings. The "constitutional monarch" presides over meetings of the Executive Council, to which important matters of government policy are referred for decision. The council is composed of government officials, with the exception of Seyyid Abdulla, the heir apparent to the throne.

The Sultan is bound to heed the "advice" of the British Resident, who could be compared with the Prime Minister of England, with the important exception of course that he is not chosen by the people.

On the local level, councils have been formed, part elective and part appointive, to handle local matters. And as Alford said in Legco recently in answer to a question from Ali Muhsin---he had asked what constitutional advances had been made in Zanzibar---about 50 statutory boards and committees have been organized, composed of people of all races, "with the object of associating the local people more effectively with the government and training them to manage their own affairs."

In these sets of conflicting views lies the dilemma of colonial rule. The nationalist will never be satisfied till he rules himself. His view is understandable, but the case for continued Colonial control can be argued just as well. People as a rule are reluctant to part with power, but it is undisputed that the ultimate British aim is self-government for Zanzibar within the Commonwealth. "We havn't worked 50 years here just to turn the government over to anyone," a British official once said to me. "When we turn it over, we want to make sure a success is made of it."

And Ali Muhsin replies that it would be successful now.

Not everyone in Zanzibar shares his views, however. Ali Muhsin invited me to the Arab Club that evening. Sitting on chairs on the lawn, swatting mosquitos and sipping orange pop, we discussed self-government and common roll with other leading Arabs.

One, an education official from Pemba, said self-government would fail at this time because of intense racial self-interest. "We need to place the interests of Zanzibar first and of the different communities second," he said, puffing on a pipe and speaking in an accent as British as one can find. "But," he said, "this is impossible at the present moment."

More education is needed. "Understanding is limited among workers in Zanzibar. Kiswahili is limited in its vocabulary and there is no literature. When a man learns to read Kiswahili, all he can do is to read Ali Muhsin's paper."

Everyone was silent while the official spoke. Then they turned to hear Ali Muhsin's reply.

He told them he is opposed to separate voting rolls and accused the British of favoring it as a divide and rule expedient. "In that kind of an election, to get the Arab votes I'd have to tell them I'd protect them from the other races. I would rather not have elections at all than have separate representation. That would perpetuate racial strife. You may or may not lose something by common roll voting, but I would rather sacrifice anything to unity."

The school official applauded and said: "If we had a couple of hundred people like you, Ali Muhsin, our troubles would be over."

On the way back to the hotel, Ali Muhsin said other Arabs fear that self-government and common roll would lead to domination by the African masses. "The older Arab likes to have his influence to maintain," he said. "He hasn't got any influence, really, but when he's reminded of it by someone, he says, 'Yes, I've got to have it.'"

Ali Muhsin says that his pleas for racial unity were not too well received at first by the elders in the Arab Association. But later when they were asked to suggest three men for the Legco seat, they included Ali Muhsin's name and the appointment followed. "The differences between the Africans and the Arabs are academic," Ali Muhsin said. "We have the same religion, we speak the same language, our cultural language---Arabic---is the same and there is a mixing of blood. We could be called a homogeneous population."

Curiously enough, some Africans fear that with immediate self-government and common roll voting, they would be swamped by the more advanced Indians and Arabs. Among the Africans who hold this view is Ameri Tajo, a member of the Legislative Council.

I batted out to the Miembeni quarter of Zanzibar town in a rickshaw the next day to have tea with Ameri Tajo and hear what he had to say.

Like all Zanzibar Africans, Ameri Tajo has none of the servility of the "Boy-Bwana" relationship one finds on the mainland. He runs a Koran school for African children at Miembeni and we sat down at a table under a tree next to the school. He had invited several Arab and African friends along so that I could talk with them, too.

Ameri Tajo is widely respected in Zanzibar by all races. He is 45 years old and dresses in the kanzu. He is a Shirazi, was born in Zanzibar and speaks no English. One of his Arab friends served as interpreter during our talk. Ameri Tajo has studied Muslim theology, the Arabic language and Arabic literature. The children at his school are taught the Koran and Arabic and the school only supplements state secular education.

He was the first African to be appointed to Legco (in 1946) and now is the senior member of any race. Speaking in Swahili, he takes an active part in the debates. He is always asking the government questions, calling attention to things he thinks should be corrected. "Is the government aware that there is no school at X and what is the government going to do about it? Is the government aware that there are only so many African nurses and what is it going to do about it," Ameri Tajo keeps asking.

Ameri Tajo said he opposes self-government and common roll at this time because "Africans are not advanced enough yet to compete with the other groups."

"With self government," he said, "the fittest would get the government posts and assume the leadership---that is, the Indians and the Arabs." Colonial Office control must continue till the African is capable of taking an equal place, he said.

Education was the answer, he said. Though elementary education is free, African fathers have not been letting their children finish up. Rather they take their sons out of school to work on the shamba. Only 23 per cent of school age children in Zanzibar are attending classes, but the situation is improving. This year, Ameri Tajo said proudly, three Africans went to Makerere.

More schools are needed, he went on. "But," he added, "because I serve in the Legislative Council I know perfectly well that this takes money and that the money is just not there. People want education to be free, so you can't blame the government."

He kept repeating to me that he couldn't tell me how important education is to Zanzibar's future. "If these people continue with their ignorance, when independence comes there will be chaos with the ignorant suspicious of those on top. You can't have progress that way," he said.

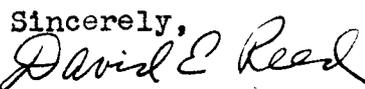
As we were leaving, one of Ameri Tajo's African friends--- who holds a bachelor's degree in economics from a British university---said:

"We were late in starting this race and we are finding it difficult to catch up."

One afternoon I took a drive through the countryside with Ali Muhsin. He talked with his customary calm enthusiasm about various ideas of his, including that cottage industries should be fostered in Zanzibar, as we bounced down a road lined with towering coconut palms.

In the distance lay the shimmering white sand beaches and just beyond them, the deep blue waters of the Indian Ocean. African laborers dozed under canopies of clove tree branches. At each little village, Arabs and Africans were sitting around in front of the dukas and in the coffee houses, letting life and time slide pleasantly by.

We pulled up at Ali Muhsin's country home on a bay at the eastern side of the island. He looked out across the languid bay, deserted except for a tiny outrigger canoe. "We've got to have unity here. We've got to sacrifice anything to unity," he said.

Sincerely,

David E. Reed