

JCB-15 The Zanzibari Arabs
of South Africa

September 1, 1962
16 Dan Pienaar Road
Durban, Natal
Republic of South Africa

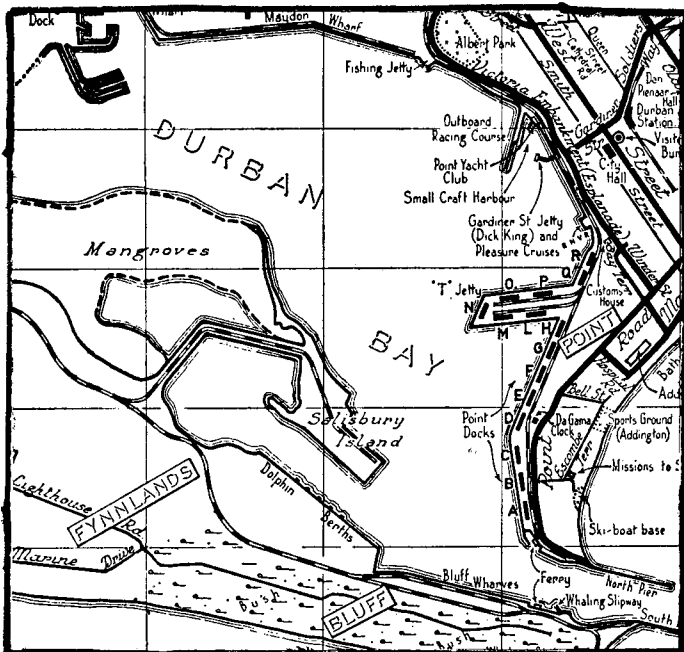
Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

High on the Bluff overlooking Durban's harbor live 500 Zanzibari Arabs whose separate identity will be lost because of the "separate development" policy of the Nationalist Government.

In 1873 twenty-two adults and about sixty children were rescued from Arab slave dhows by the British Navy and brought to Durban. A Moslem charity organization came to their aid and gave them 25 acres of land on the then virtually isolated Bluff. There they were able to fashion, with the few resources they had, a pleasant community centered in the mosque and a religious school for their children. Over the years many of them have come to speak English but Swahili is still their home language and Arabic is the language of their religion. They have led a rather peaceful and insular life which has attracted little attention.

In the passage of time more and more Europeans built homes on the Bluff until the four-generation old Moslem community was almost surrounded. Then a few years ago, with the Nationalist Party demand that all the races be separated, the Bluff was zoned for Europeans only. The Zanzibari Arabs, whose dark skin proclaimed them non-European, would have to move. But where? They were too few to have a racial classification and a group area all their own.



Map of Durban Bay showing the Bluff in the foreground

Through the classification mill

In the 1930's, in an attempt to collect taxes, the South African Government had taken a look at them and decided they were "Natives". The present Government accepted that classification and amid much Arab protest decided to place them in an African location. A Durban MP, moved by their plight, brought the matter to the floor of Parliament and pointed out that the religion, language and historical roots of the Arabs had little in common with that of the Zulu or any other Native tribe in South Africa. The Government hesitantly acknowledged that they were not "Native".

But what were they? Since some of the Arabs had light-coloured skin it was considered possible that they were descendents of an earlier mixed racial parentage. Their classification was changed to "Coloured".

This decision aroused the Natal Coloureds. They were Christian and disliked the idea that Moslems who also spoke a different language might be placed in their group area. The attitude of the Coloureds who met to discuss the problem was best summed up by one irate woman who said, "Let them become European if the Government finds it necessary to classify them."

The Government, despite this advice, has re-classified them as "Other Asiatics". This means that they will probably be settled in an Indian location. (Their children are already going to Indian schools). They do share with some Indians a common religion, and in appearance some could pass for Indian, but they feel very strongly that they have a separate identity. Even the Government recognizes that there is a distinction and has issued them identity cards which state they are "Zanzibari Arab".

However, their future looks bleak. When they are moved out of the area which has been their home they will lose both their geographical separation and their historical relatedness. In another area they will be a small group within a much larger one and it will only be a matter of time before their solidarity lessens and their distinctiveness is lost.

The neighbors grow restive

Some of the European residents adjacent to the tree and bush-shrouded Arab community have put increased pressure on Government officials to hurry them along. They complain about uncontrolled beer-making and drinking, about dirty children leaving candy and ice-cream wrappers in the streets before their houses, about the foul language the people use and about the fact that some of them use the water taps on European houses when the owners are absent.



A typical tree-shaded home
than my own when they are playing at home.

It is true that the municipal authorities have not provided them with facilities for an indoor water supply. Outside taps are spaced through the settlement, as are toilets and latrines. These seemed to be as clean as possible under the circumstances. The leader of the community said they are very strict about prohibiting outsiders who might spoil the group's law-abiding reputation. They have had to call the police to eject those making and drinking beer in their territory. As Moslems they do not drink.



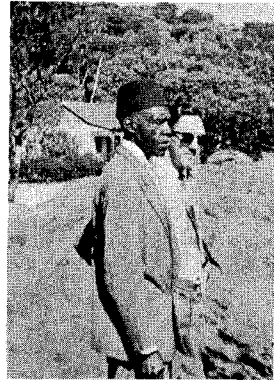
Community cemetery and Mosque

On a recent visit I received quite a different impression. It is far from a festering slum. Most of the houses are well built although out of cheap materials (mostly tin and iron). They are pleasantly furnished. Grounds and gardens are generally well cared for. Their clothing was surprisingly good considering their low income and their children were no more dirty or ill-dressed

But there has been a deterioration of morale which probably hasn't done much to pacify their antagonistic neighbors. It is reflected in the gradual deterioration of their homes. Those who have had to build recently have put up temporary dwellings and there is little interest in making major repairs which will go to waste when they are moved. Already there is a

lessening of the group's cohesion.

While the Government has assured the Arabs they will have another mosque and madressa in their new home, nothing has been decided as yet about the cemetery which adjoins their mosque and which is an important part of their religion and their community. There are also problems inherent in the plight of families who will be unable to pay the higher rent required for homes in the new location. And what will become of the parentless children now cared for by the community but belonging to no specific family? In moving to a new location they will obviously be moving into a new and untried way of life.



The leader of the community discusses his problems with a representative of the Institute of Race Relations

End of the line?

In a few years there will be little on the Bluff to indicate the Zanzibari Arabs ever existed except perhaps for their small burying ground. By most standards of importance they are an insignificant group. They have no political influence; they have never been interested in political affairs nor in anything outside their immediate community. No sociological study has ever been made of them nor is there any accurate written history of their group. What becomes of them under the separate development policy matters little among all the other larger groups who are suffering hardships in moving from one group area to another.

But the Zanzibari Arabs are important to themselves. They care deeply.

Sincerely yours,

James C. Brewer
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Received in New York September 11, 1962.