

Review Article

The Sultanate of Zanzibar, the Beginning of Portuguese Control, and the Role of Arabs in their Expulsion

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Abstract: The name Zanzibar refers to a group of islands located near Oman or Tanzania in East Africa. The ancient Greeks and Romans called it "Máthos" as they had commercial connections with the region. Zanzibar enjoyed autonomous authority over the Indian Ocean. During the Age of Exploration, the Portuguese Empire became the first European power to take control of Zanzibar, ruling for 200 years. Under their rule, trade, economy, and agriculture developed, particularly the cultivation of spices, cloves, and garlic. This earned Zanzibar the metaphorical title of the "Spice Islands," competing with the Dutch-colonized Maluku Islands in Indonesia. Additionally, Zanzibar was a major hub for the ivory trade, with elephant tusks sourced from mainland Africa. The third key trade sector was the slave trade, as thousands of individuals from neighboring regions were captured and sold into slavery on the island. Zanzibar, like other African ports, became a primary destination for slave traders from Europe and America, further enhancing its role in the Arab-dominated slave trade. The Indian Ocean was comparable in significance to the transatlantic triangular trade between Europe, America, and Africa. Furthermore, the Sultan of Zanzibar controlled a large portion of East Africa's coastline, known as the Swahili Coast, along with extensive inland trade routes.

Keywords: Zanzibar, African ports, slave trade, East African coast, Kilwa.

INTRODUCTION

During the Age of Exploration, the Portuguese Empire became the first European power to seize control of Zanzibar, maintaining its rule for 200 years. Under Portuguese governance, trade, the economy, and agricultural production flourished, particularly with the cultivation of spices, cloves, and garlic. This earned Zanzibar the symbolic title of the "Spice Islands," positioning it as a competitor to the Dutch-colonized Maluku Islands in Indonesia.

Zanzibar also engaged in the ivory trade, sourcing elephant tusks from the African mainland. However, the most notorious aspect of its commerce was the slave trade, where thousands of individuals from neighboring regions were captured and sold into slavery on the island. Like other African ports, Zanzibar became a major destination for European and American slave traders, reinforcing its significance in the Arab-controlled slave trade. The Indian Ocean trade network rivaled the transatlantic triangular trade between Europe, America, and Africa in its scale and importance. Furthermore, the Sultan of Zanzibar exercised authority over a substantial portion of East Africa's coastline, known as the Swahili Coast, as well as extensive inland trade routes.

Preface

The name Zanzibar refers to a group of islands located near Oman or Tanzania in East Africa. In ancient times, the Greeks and Romans referred to Zanzibar as "Máthos" due to their commercial connections with the region. The island enjoyed a degree of autonomous authority over the Indian Ocean. The name "Zanzibar" is a compound term derived from

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"Bar al-Zanj," meaning "Land of the Blacks." It is also known as "the Great Island" and is referred to in Swahili as "Unguja," which is the largest city on the island.

Zanzibar consists of two major islands, Zanzibar and Pemba (also called "the Green Island"), in addition to several smaller islands associated with it. In English, it is known as Zanzibar, though some sources refer to it as Anguana. It has also been called the "Island of Slaves" (Island of Slave), though this designation is considered historically weak. Today, Zanzibar is part of modern-day Tanzania.

Zanzibar's strategic location near the Indian Ocean, particularly its proximity to Oman and its position at the entrance of the Strait of Hormuz, made it a key focal point for external powers competing for control over the region.

Zanzibar, along with most surrounding islands, historically formed a unified region. It is the second-largest island in the Indian Ocean after Madagascar, located 118 miles south of Mombasa and 750 miles from Madagascar, with a total area of 950 square kilometers. Zanzibar also boasts some of the most fertile lands suitable for cultivating almonds, rice, and cloves. Clove plantations expanded significantly, with approximately one million clove trees planted until recent times. The island is traversed by its largest river, the Mubara River, which provides irrigation for extensive clove plantations.

Several factors have influenced Zanzibar's historical significance, including its tropical climate, fertile soil, and monsoon winds that have reached the island via the Indian Ocean since ancient times. These conditions attracted travelers, missionaries, and competing powers from the Arabian Peninsula, Asia, Europe, and the African mainland. As a result, Zanzibar became a hub for Arabs and Indians and a target for foreign domination. Its strategic location in the Indian Ocean drew significant interest from those seeking to establish control and exert influence over the region.

The island's population has historically been diverse, with Arabs settling in four primary groups: the Shahri people from Hadhramaut, the Comorians from the Comoros Islands, the coastal Arabs, and the Shatari and Maghazi tribes. These Arab communities held significant influence across Zanzibar and its surrounding islands.

First: Geographical Location

The island of Zanzibar is located in the Indian Ocean, off the east coast of Africa, between latitudes 5.48° and 6.30° south of the equator. It is the largest coral island on the African coast, measuring 54 miles in length and 24 miles in width, with a total area of 640 square miles. The island has been referred to by various names, including Zanzibar (Zanzibar), Zanjibar (Zanjibar), Ghoncibar (Ghoncibar), Xengibar (Xengibar), and Janjibar (Janjibar). It has also been called Unguja, a name derived from two words: Ungo, meaning "tray," and Ja, meaning "full," symbolizing the island's historical abundance. Some argue that the name should now be changed, as prosperity has diminished and the tray is no longer full.

Unguja is the capital of Zanzibar and is also known as the "Garden of East Africa." It covers an area of 1,660 square kilometers, with a length of 85 kilometers and a width of 40 kilometers. The islands of Zanzibar (Unguja and Pemba) are among the most fertile regions in Africa. The primary source of irrigation is rainfall, which occurs for at least 150 days per year, with some estimates suggesting that rain falls on up to 75% of the days in a year. The geological foundation of the island consists mainly of coral rocks. The eastern and western coasts of the island differ significantly; the eastern coast is characterized by rocky terrain, whereas the western coast features numerous inlets, which have facilitated the establishment of several natural harbors.

The East African coast, stretching from Ras Gardafui in the north to Dakad Bay in the south, was referred to by the Arabs as the Swahili Coast or Zanjibar (Zanzibar). The name is derived from the Persian word Bar, meaning "coast." The Greeks and Romans referred to the region as the Azania Coast, named after the ancient Kingdom of Azania, which is believed to have existed in southern Arabia before the advent of Islam.

The history of Zanzibar spans multiple historical phases, including the origins of the name "Zanj." The most powerful state to emerge in this region was the Zanj Empire, which existed from the 10th to the 15th century, with its capital in Kilwa, located on the southern coast of present-day Tanzania, west of the border with Mozambique. Additionally, several Islamic emirates existed in the region. However, some historians believe that older cities predate Kilwa, which later became the capital of Zanzibar and played a significant role in its history for an extended period.

The Portuguese successfully took control of Zanzibar and other key regions during the first two decades of the 16th century. By the late 16th century, competition between Portugal and Britain intensified, leading to the shift of trade routes toward the Cape of Good Hope. This shift facilitated the rise of the Ya'ariba Dynasty in Oman in 1623, which marked the beginning of the Omani-Portuguese conflict in East Africa.

As the Ya'ariba state weakened due to its struggle against the Portuguese and internal divisions, factions emerged within Oman. Some supported the Ya'ariba rule (the Ghafiris), while others backed the Al Bu Said dynasty (the Hinawis). Despite their strong rule over Zanzibar since 1698 particularly during the reign of Sultan bin Saif Al-Ya'aribi these internal conflicts contributed to their decline.

By the late 18th century, Britain entered Oman and Zanzibar, acting through its government in India. This led to the signing of the first Treaty of Trade and Navigation with Muscat in 1798, approved by Sultan bin Ahmad. This treaty established British dominance over Oman, Zanzibar, and its surrounding islands. However, Britain's influence remained limited until the Al Bu Said government relocated its capital to Zanzibar, solidifying its control in the region.

Second: The Early Emergence of Islam in Zanzibar

The first Islamic group to arrive in Zanzibar was in 702 CE, during the reign of Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, who sent a group of people from Bilad al-Sham to settle there. Their primary mission was to supply the caliphate with ivory, gold, copper, and spices, which were abundant in Zanzibar and Kilwa. However, some historians suggest that the arrival of Muslims in Zanzibar coincided with Abd al-Malik's wars against his rivals, which forced a significant number of people to migrate to East Africa. These migrants established cities along the coast, such as Malindi, Zanzibar, Lamu, and Pate, between 684 and 705 CE.

Another perspective suggests that Ali bin al-Hasan bin Ali, son of the ruler of Shiraz, migrated to the East African coast with his family in 975 CE. It is believed that his Ethiopian maternal lineage led to discrimination from his six brothers, who were of Persian descent and connected to the Persian rulers. As a result, he relocated to the region, where he established a strong and stable state in a short period and gained the trust of the local population.

Muslims intermarried with the indigenous Zanj population, contributing to the gradual spread of Islam. The religion was embraced voluntarily as Islam allowed freedom of worship and religious discussions, attracting the people of Zanzibar through its principles and the good treatment they received from Muslim traders and preachers. Since Islam was primarily introduced by merchants and religious scholars rather than political rulers, its spread was not through force but through peaceful and gradual interactions. When some men converted, their tribesmen often followed, leading to the widespread adoption of Islam and the integration of Arabic terms into the local language through cultural exchange rather than military conquest.

Before the arrival of Muslims in Zanzibar and their interactions with the local people, the society predominantly practiced paganism. The Zanj people believed in spirits, magic, and sorcery, making divination, witchcraft, and superstition among the most defining characteristics of Zanzibari society. Additionally, they practiced intercession through the dead, believing that deceased individuals could influence the affairs of the living. However, Islam liberated them from these fears, teaching that the dead possess neither power nor influence over the living.

Zanzibari society was composed of various collective communities, each deeply attached to its traditional religious affiliations. However, many found in the Muslim community and their brotherhood a superior alternative. As Islam spread, the people of Zanzibar gradually turned to worshipping Allah alone, performing prayers, and purifying themselves. They gathered in a single mosque, which became a beacon of knowledge and Islamic civilization within villages. The mosque was not only a place of worship but also a center for Quranic education and Islamic teachings. It also served as the venue for religious celebrations, including the two Islamic Eids.

Islam flourished along the coastal regions and gradually expanded inland through the Swahili people, who developed an African culture influenced by Arab-Islamic traditions. The impact of Islam was not limited to religious aspects but also brought significant social changes. It abolished gender, racial, and class distinctions within society, fostering brotherhood among Arabs, Persians, Indians, and Africans in Zanzibar. As intermarriage between these groups became common, they blended into a unified community bound by their shared Islamic faith.

Islam brought a fundamental transformation to the economic system in Zanzibar. Previously, the economy was concentrated in the hands of a select group of tribal leaders and chiefs, who controlled land ownership and trade ships, while the rest of the population endured deprivation and hardship. Additionally, these leaders imposed exorbitant taxes on the people. However, after the people of Zanzibar embraced Islam, the economic system underwent significant changes, particularly in terms of ownership and taxation. Taxes were no longer an oppressive burden; instead, they were collected from the wealthy in the form of zakat and redistributed to the poor. The leaders became responsible for gathering and distributing these funds and even fought against those who refused to pay. Furthermore, Islam prohibited usury and fraud, which had a profound moral impact on the island's inhabitants, who were influenced by Muslim merchants.

Islam also introduced a structured political system, where rulers were appointed through consultation (shura) in accordance with divine commands.

Islam and its civilization remained deeply rooted in East Africa, particularly in Zanzibar, until the 15th century, when the Portuguese invasion sought to eliminate the Islamic presence to gain control over global trade. Arabs were among the first to engage in commerce and exploration in Africa, particularly in North Africa and the eastern coasts, as well as the hinterlands beyond these coastal areas. They also played a role in European explorations, serving as guides and navigators for European explorers.

Additionally, some Arab travelers conducted extensive journeys across Africa, visiting various regions. Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula, particularly from the Emirate of Oman, migrated to the East African coast, which was geographically close to their homeland. As Coupland described them, they were “next-door neighbors” to East African inhabitants. Consequently, they naturally extended their trade, activities, and civilization to the eastern coasts of Africa.

Another key factor facilitating Arab expansion was geographical, particularly the seasonal monsoon winds. The northeastern trade winds blew from December to February, allowing for regular and predictable voyages. Then, from April onward, strong southwestern winds took over, reversing the direction of travel. This consistent seasonal pattern enabled Arab merchants to plan their journeys to the East African coast with great precision, ensuring the continued expansion of their trade and influence.

Third: Zanzibar and the Arab Presence Before the Portuguese Invasion

Kilwa controlled most of the cities on the eastern African coast, particularly the islands of Zanzibar, Pemba, and Mafia, which are located not far from the coast. These islands were largely populated by Muslim Arabs, and the sultans of Kilwa extended their influence over these islands. They used them as safe havens, seeking the assistance of their rulers whenever they faced any adversity. The islands enjoyed a certain level of autonomy, which fluctuated depending on the strength of the Kilwa sultans and the general prosperity or decline of the region.

Despite some hostility between Kilwa and these cities, there was also a kind of alliance between them. Zanzibar is the largest coral island off the eastern coast of Africa, composed of two main islands: Zanzibar and Pemba, located to its northeast. It was historically considered the residence of the Zanj kings, with the old name of Zanzibar being Lanjuba, or Unguja. It was also known as Qunbulu. These islands were ruled by Arab Muslim princes since the 10th century. Arab inscriptions were found in the Kismkazi mosque on the eastern side of Zanzibar, and many of its inhabitants were Arabs, as were its traders, predominantly Omanis and Sirafis. However, there was also a group of pagan Africans living among the settled Muslim Arabs.

Al-Mas'udi tells us that the first settlement of Muslim Arabs in Qunbulu occurred during the early period of the Abbasid Caliphate, at the close of the Umayyad Caliphate. The Arabs established themselves and extended their control over the region, likely between 747-750 CE, which is our only evidence of the early Islamic migration to Zanzibar.

This history leads us to question whether there was a Zaidi migration to the coast, which we hypothesize may have occurred during the period between the end of the Umayyad Caliphate and the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate. It seems that one of the groups from this migration may have headed to Zanzibar and settled there. Most of these migrations likely came to the eastern African coast from the Arabian Gulf, including migrations from Basra and Kufa. Al-Hamawi confirms that the ruler of the region was an Arab from Kufa, as reported by Sheikh Abdul Malik al-Halawi al-Basri, a trustworthy man who had visited the place and was familiar with the Sultan. In 1204, Sultan Yusuf bin Alawi al-Abdali arrived in Zanzibar from one of the regions of Basra, where he founded the city of Makutani.

Early Chinese sources have also hinted at the existence of Arab Muslim presence in East Africa, particularly in Zanzibar, during the 12th and 13th centuries. These sources mention the Tashi Arabs of Tsungh (Zanzibar), who followed the Tashi religion and traded in gold, ivory, and sandalwood. Ships from all over the world docked in Zanzibar, and the island was known for producing the finest cotton and silk fabrics, as well as coconut fiber ropes.

The society of Zanzibar is a blend of various ethnicities, with Arabs holding a prominent position. A large number of Arab Muslims migrated to Zanzibar and settled there long ago, alongside non-Arab Asians who engaged in trade on the islands, in addition to the native African inhabitants. Over centuries, the Arabs intermarried extensively with the local population. Today, it is rare to find any Africans in Zanzibar who do not have some Arab ancestry, except for those coming from other regions. With the arrival of the Portuguese and their control over most of the Arab Muslim cities, including these islands, the Arab Islamic rule was temporarily ended. However, in 1698, the Omani rulers regained control over Zanzibar, ending the Portuguese colonial rule of the coast.

Fourth: Portuguese Colonization

The arrival of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in the region in 1497 marked the beginning of European influence in the area. He arrived after the encouraging attempts of Diaz and Da Covilhão and navigated around the Cape of Good Hope, sailing towards India, keeping his ships close to the East African coast. He passed by Zanzibar and stopped at Mombasa, where he was met with hostility from the Sultan. However, he was warmly welcomed in Malindi, the traditional enemies of Mombasa, which enabled him to establish a strong friendship along the Malindi coast. He erected a commemorative monument there and contracted with the Arab guide Ahmad bin Majid, who, with his expertise in the monsoon winds, successfully crossed the Indian Ocean, reaching Calicut (known today as Kozhikode) in Southwest India. On his return from India, he anchored in Unguja (Zanzibar) before heading back to Portugal in 1499.

The arrival of explorers continued into the early 16th century, with many recording the civilizational features of Zanzibar in particular and East Africa in general. The Portuguese traveler Duarte Barbosa described the region before colonization: "When Vasco da Gama's ships arrived, we were surprised by what we didn't expect. We found harbors buzzing like beehives, coastal cities teeming with people, and a trading world larger than ours. We found Arab sailors who had crossed the Indian Ocean and knew the intricacies of its ports. They recorded these details in precise maps that were of great use to Europe."

The Portuguese decided to occupy Zanzibar four years later and forgot all the friendships they had built as soon as they arrived in Unguja in 1503. Once their ships anchored south of the island, they seized and captured twenty Swahili sailing ships and killed 35 of the sailors aboard those ships. They then forced Makini Mku, the Sultan of the island, to submit to Portuguese rule and allow their ships to pass through the island. They also demanded an annual tax be paid to the Portuguese crown, making Zanzibar part of the Portuguese empire in August 1505, when the Portuguese fleet, led by Francisco de Almeida, attacked Mombasa and Pemba. In 1510, the Portuguese imposed the Unguja tax and the people of Pemba revolted against the Portuguese. The Portuguese then began looting and burning the villages in Pemba and regained control of both islands. By 1525, they had established control over most of the East African coast, taking control of the trade in gold, ivory, ebony, and slaves, which were transported from within Africa to their colonies in India or to Portugal.

Fifth: The Role of the Al Ya'ariba in Expelling Portuguese Colonialism.

By the 16th century, the eastern coast of Africa, like other regions of the East, faced the dangers of Portuguese invasion. Portuguese historical records indicate that Zanzibar was a friendly and loyal ally of Portugal, to the extent that they did not impose a tribute on it, unlike the tribute they imposed on Al-Jazira Al-Khadra (Green Island), which was 600 sacks of rice annually because the island remained in conflict and dispute with Portugal. Another report mentions that in 1710, a military garrison from Oman arrived in Zanzibar and Al-Jazira Al-Khadra. Their arrival was likely to quell the unrest faced by the rulers of Zanzibar, who were friends of Portugal. Some historical accounts state that in 1728, the Portuguese once again took control of Mombasa. Hassan bin Fatimah was supposed to reach Mombasa, but he was unable to proceed, so he sent his son Muhammad instead. This indicates that there were friendly relations and ties between him and Portugal, but Hassan was unable to formalize them due to the strong presence of the Omani Arabs. By sending his son, it appears that the Portuguese had returned to Zanzibar.

This situation prompted the people of these areas and cities to seek help from the Al Ya'ariba state, after their victories in expelling the Portuguese colonialism from their lands. In response to the call for help, some Arab families and tribes rose to power and ruled the cities and districts along the eastern African coast, including the Mazari'ah tribe in Mombasa. Thus, Oman's involvement in the Arab-Portuguese conflict in East Africa began. The Al Ya'ariba state was able to achieve significant success in weakening Portuguese control over East Africa and also succeeded in ending Portuguese domination in both Oman and the Arabian Gulf.

While Imam Nasser bin Murshid, the founder of the Al Ya'ariba state (1624–1649), spent his reign consolidating his family's power and confronting the Portuguese in the Arabian Gulf and Oman, his successor, Sultan bin Saif (1646–1668), focused on East Africa and expelled the Portuguese from the northern ports, making Oman the main player in East African affairs. Sultan bin Saif almost succeeded in establishing an Arab-African empire on the ruins of Portuguese colonies.

CONCLUSION

From this, we can conclude that the Arabs played an important and distinguished role in the history of Zanzibar. The initial spread of Islam was through the Arabs, and the people of Zanzibar embraced Islam either through Hassan bin Ali or through Muslim Arab traders. Islam provided them with religious freedom, the ability to worship, and the kind treatment they received from the Islamic missionaries or traders, who did not hold political power. Thus, Islam did not spread through force but rather through invitation and advocacy.

Moreover, Islam brought about a radical change in the economic system. The economy in Zanzibar had been in the hands of a specific group of leaders and tribal chiefs. After the people of Zanzibar embraced Islam, their economic system changed according to Islamic principles. Additionally, the Arabs played a key role in freeing Zanzibar from Portuguese colonialism. The Al Ya'ariba state achieved many victories in expelling the Portuguese from their lands, and several Arab families and tribes rose to power, ruling cities and districts in East Africa.

FOOTNOTES

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