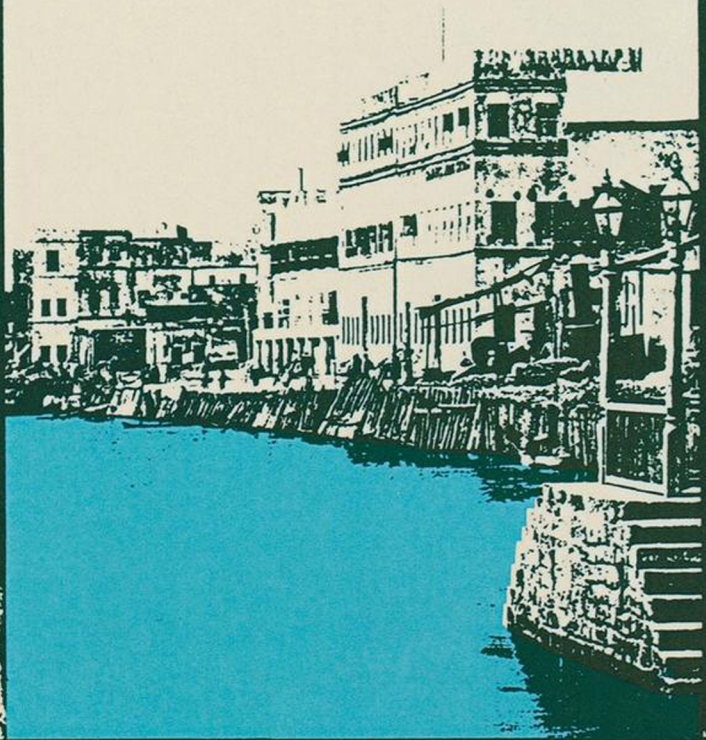
ABDUL SHERIFF

# Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar



EASTERN AFRICAN STUDIES

Reviews of
*Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar*
by Abdul Sheriff

'. . . a most important contribution to historiography, providing very rich funds of evidence and seeking to harness them with theory . . .'
Marcia Wright in *African Economic History*

'*Slaves, spices and ivory* has considerable strengths. There are important insights and revisions derived from Sheriff's attention to economic detail and from his use of a wide range of carefully collated sources. The slave trade figures are corrected downwards for the nineteenth century and the point is made that earlier estimates were based on self-serving British sources. The commercial linkages between Zanzibar and its hinterland are clarified.'
Richard Waller in *The Historical Review*

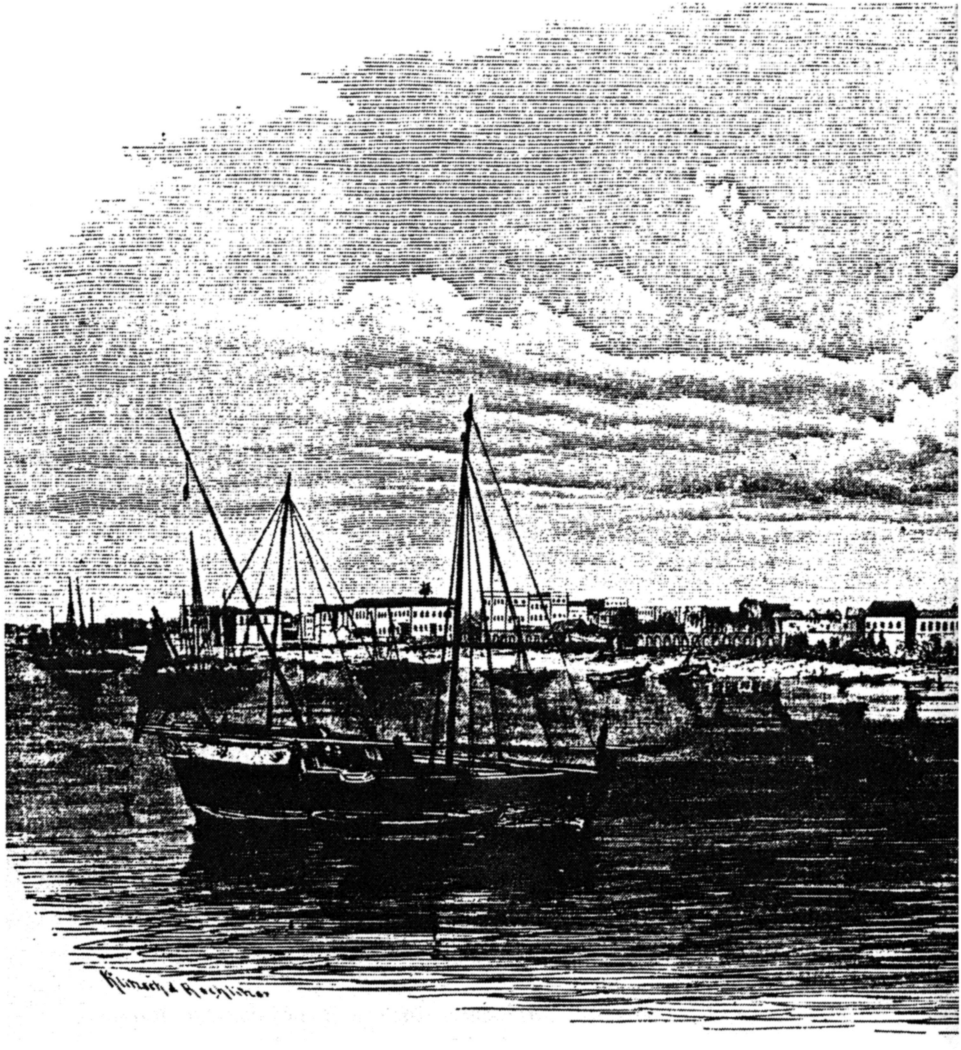
'Sheriff's book deserves a wide audience and careful study.'
Frederick Cooper *The Journal of Peasant Studies*

'For most readers the main value of Sheriff's work will probably still lie in its richly documented narrative of the transformations in Zanzibar's economy from an outpost of Omani trade to a centre of its own commercial empire and plantation system, subjected to continual intervention from the informal overlordship of Britain. Sheriff not only tells us a good deal about Zanzibar and its well-known Omani and British ties, but also provides excellent accounts of the island's relationships with the rest of the Persian Gulf, the French plantations of the Indian Ocean, India, the United States, and the interior of East Africa. In addition to the text, his book contains extensive statistical information and, surprisingly in this age of barebones publication, a large number of valuable illustrations.'
Ralph A. Austen in *The Journal of African History*

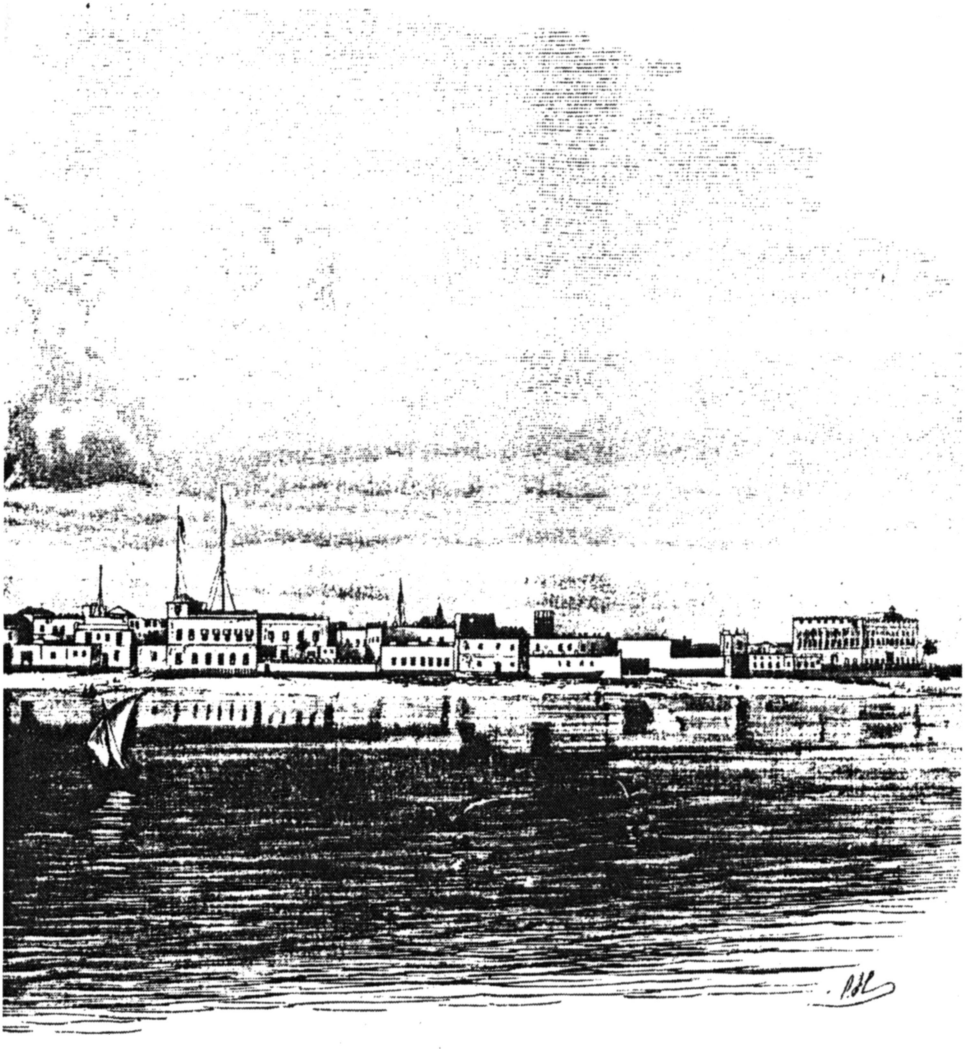
'Professor Sheriff's book on the rise and fall of the commercial empire of Zanzibar is an immensely satisfying one. It is both elegantly written and vigorously argued. The study, based on scrupulous historical research and an incisive use of Marxist theory, succeeds in illuminating the major transformations which were occurring on the East African coast and its hinterland during the nineteenth century . . . it is in every respect an admirable book.'
Nigel Penn in *The Journal of Southern African History*

'Presented a well-researched, provocative look at economic development and imperialism in Zanzibar. It is highly recommended.'
Calvin H. Allen Jr. in *The Middle East Journal*

Abdul Sheriff, Tanzania Publishing House
and James Currey Publishers acknowledge the help of
the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Development Co-operation
in making an edition of this book available
in Tanzania



# *Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar*



## EASTERN AFRICAN STUDIES

Abdul Sheriff
*Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar*
*Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy 1770-1873*

Isaria N. Kimambo
*Penetration & Protest in Tanzania**
*The Impact of the World Economy on the Pare 1860-1960*

T.L. Maliyamkono & M.S.D. Bagachwa
*The Second Economy in Tanzania*

Tabitha Kanogo
*Squatters & the Roots of Mau Mau* 1905-1963

David W. Throup
*Economic and Social Origins of Mau Mau* 1945-1953

Frank Furedi
*The Mau Mau War in Perspective*

David Willim Cohen & E.S. Atieno Odhiambo
*Siaya*
*The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape*

Bruce Berman & John Lonsdale
*Unhappy Valley**
*Clan, Class & State in Colonial Kenya*

Bruce Berman
*Crisis & Control in Colonial Kenya**
*The Dialectic of Domination*

Holger Bernt Hansen & Michael Twaddle
*Uganda Now*

Bahru Zewde*
*A History of Modern Ethiopia*
1855-1974

* forthcoming

# *Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar*

## Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770–1873

*Abdul Sheriff*

Professor of History
University of Dar es Salaam

*James Currey*
LONDON

*Heinemann Kenya*
NAIROBI

*Tanzania Publishing House*
DAR ES SALAAM

*Ohio University Press*
ATHENS

Electronic edition published in 2016

Ohio University Press
www.ohioswallow.com

James Currey
Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge
Suffolk IP12 3DF (GB)
www.jamescurrey.com

Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue
Rochester, NY 14620-2731 (US)
www.boydellandbrewer.com


First published 1987
Reprinted 1990

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**
Sheriff, Abdul
Slaves, spices and ivory in Zanzibar: integration of an East African commercial empire into the world economy, 1770–1873.
——(East African studies)
1. Zanzibar——Economic conditions——To 1964
I. Title II. Series
330.9678'102 HC885.Z7Z3

ISBN 0-85255-014-6
ISBN 0-85255-015-4 Pbk
ISBN 978-0-8214-0872-8
**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
Sheriff, Abdul
Slaves, spices and ivory in Zanzibar
Revision of the author's thesis.
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Zanzibar——Commerce——History——18th century.
2. Zanzibar——Commerce——History——19th century.
3. Slave-trade——Tanzania——Zanzibar——History.
4. Spice trade——Tanzania——Zanzibar——History. I. Title.
HF3897.S54 1987 382'.096781 87-12339

ISBN 0-8214-0871-2
ISBN 0-8214-0872-0 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-78204-777-3 (James Currey eISBN)
ISBN 978-0-8214-4021-6 (Ohio University Press eISBN)

*To Suhail*

# *Contents*

# *Preface*

The publication of a book so many years after the completion of the doctoral thesis on which it is based requires an explanation, if not an apology. African historiography has been going through such rapid changes since the coming of independence from colonial rule in the early 1960s that any extended piece of research has had to contend with strong intellectual eddies if not outright contrary currents. History has become one of the battlegrounds for contending ideological forces trying to interpret the past in terms of the present, and vice-versa. The perspective depends very much on one's vantage point, not only in geographical terms between Africa and the Western metropoles, but even more importantly in philosophical terms.

The research for the thesis was done in the late 1960s partly in the United States, France and India, but largely in London which has a well-established scholarly tradition and unrivalled research facilities. I owe to Professor Richard Gray, who supervised the thesis, as well as other scholars at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, an enormous debt in initiating me into what may be termed the SOAS school of African history which has obtained its fullest expression in the *Cambridge History of Africa*.

Halfway through my research I went to the University of Dar es Salaam to teach for a year, and I found myself in the middle of an intense philosophical debate on the nature of African history, reflecting the changes that Africa was then going through. It had already given rise to what came to be called the Dar es Salaam school of nationalist history which was bent on discovering the African initiative in history that colonialism seemed to have obliterated. The approach is best summarised in Professor Terence Ranger's inaugural lecture and demonstrated in the *History of Tanzania* edited by I.N. Kimambo and A.J. Temu. But the school was already being challenged by the emerging 'radical' school influenced initially by the Latin American theory of underdevelopment and dependency, and later by Marxist theory. The atmosphere was vivacious and from it emerged Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, and a series of three conferences on the history of Tanzania, Kenya

and Zanzibar under colonial rule of which the proceedings of only the first, unfortunately, have so far been published.

My encounter with this new trend during that first year at Dar es Salaam was of too short a duration to allow me to digest it, and yet long enough to impress upon me the need to come to grips with the fundamental philosophical questions in the debate. Although I went on to complete my thesis at London using all the empiricist skills I had learnt, I began to carry out a thorough critique of my own work upon my return to Dar es Salaam. This led me to the decision, perhaps unfortunate in hindsight, that I should refrain from publishing the results of my research, even with the fresh dust-covers of a new introduction and conclusion to gloss over the intellectual dilemma that I, and some other scholars at the time, faced. I decided instead to try to bring harmony to my mind first and revise the thesis accordingly to maintain its unity. Laudable as this was, I was to realise rather painfully with time that a new philosophical tradition cannot be learnt overnight and used as 'a tool of analysis'; it has to be developed and internalised through endless debate and struggle. This meant participation not only in strictly academic activities, including the teaching of new areas of history such as Tanzanian economic history, and contributing to various textbook projects of which Tanzanian schools as well as the University of Dar es Salaam were then in need, but also extra-curricular activities in which an academic comes face to face with the realities of life.

During this long period the various chapters went through several revisions, and the present work had to be almost entirely rewritten. While the primary research done for the thesis still forms the bedrock of primary data, a greater theoretical clarity has enabled me to interpret and bring out the full significance of the historical trends I had tried to analyse. One of the more significant dimensions that was poorly developed in the original thesis, which was conceived as 'a purely economic history', was the political aspect, both internally in connection with the political role played by the various classes in the commercial empire, and externally in terms of the long-term subordination of Zanzibar to British over-rule, and the interconnection between the two.

It has not been easy over the last few years to keep up with ongoing research, especially that carried out in the United Kingdom and the United States. Although certain aspects of the economic transformation of East Africa in the nineteenth century have undoubtedly been picked up for detailed analysis by other scholars, I nevertheless feel that there is enough merit left in what I did to warrant the publication of the broad interpretation of the history presented below.

The honours list of people who have directly or indirectly contributed to the formulation and execution of the present work has grown to such lengths after all these years that it would be impossible to list them all;

sometimes it is difficult for me even to remember where I picked up a particular fruitful lead. But the main source of ideas that have fashioned the present work has undoubtedly been the University of Dar es Salaam. Interdisciplinary barriers were breached in many places during the 1970s to permit a lively and very fruitful cross-fertilisation of thought to understand social change which, after all, is hardly divisible into neat academic compartments. A partial list of people who have contributed to the development of my own thought may be an unsatisfactory one, but it would be unforgivable not to mention my colleagues Mr Ernest Wamba, Professor Issa Shivji and Mr Helge Kjekshus, as well as Professors Steve Feierman, Ned Alpers and David Birmingham with whom I have had intense exchanges of ideas at various times.

Although a long period separates the present work from the original research, it would be unfair to forget the librarians and archival staff who had contributed to the success of the research, at the Public Record Office and India Office in London; in Paris; at the National Archives in New Delhi and the Maharashtra State Archives in Bombay, and particularly at the research institutions in Salem, Massachusetts, where personal attention to a researcher's needs has left very fond memories. I should also record my appreciation to the Rockefeller Foundation for support during the initial research for my thesis, and the Ford Foundation for support during the year I spent at Madison, Wisconsin, when I began the revision. My gratitude to the University of Dar es Salaam, and the History Department in particular, which provided the milieu and direct and indirect support during all these years, however, remains immeasurable.

Finally, the revision of my thesis has encompassed so much of the early life of my son Suhail that it is only fitting I should dedicate this book to him to record my appreciation for his patience and companionship, and to make up for any neglect he may have suffered.

A.S.
Dubai

# *Illustrations*

*Acknowledgements for illustrations*

Plates 1, 3 and 6 from R.F. Burton, *Zanzibar: City, Island Coast* (2 vols, 1872); Plates 2, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17, 23, 31 and 33 from The Peabody Museum, Salem, Massachusetts; Plates 4, 5, 12, 19, 22 and frontispiece from Carl von der Decken, *Reisen in Ost-Afrika* (1869); Plate 7 from Abdul Sheriff; Plate 8 from H.H. Johnson, *The Kilima-Njaro Expedition* (1886); Plate 10 from *The London Illustrated News*, 18th June 1842; Plates 15 and 16 from V. Giraud, *Les Lacs de l'Afrique Equatoriale* (1890); Plate 18 from 'The Stone Town of Zanzibar: A Strategy for Integrated Development', a technical report commissioned by the UN Centre for Human Settlement, 1983; Plate 21 from J.R. Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise with Notes of a Sojourn on the Island of Zanzibar* (1846); Plates 24, 25 and 26 from Baur and Le Roy, *A Travers le Zanguebar* (1886); Plate 27 from R.F. Burton, *The Lake Regions of Central Africa* (2 vols, 1860); Plate 28 from H.M. Stanley, *How I Found Livingstone* (1872); Plate 29 from M.G. Alexis, *Stanley L'Africain* (1890); Plate 30 from H.M. Stanley *In Darkest Africa* (1890); Plate 32 from P.H. Colomb, *Slave Catching in the Indian Ocean* (1873); Plate 34 from *Harper's Weekly*, 5th July 1873.

# *Maps, Graphs and Tables*

## MAPS



## GRAPHS



## TABLES

# *Abbreviations*

| | |
|---|---|
| Adm. | Admiralty Records at Public Record Office, Kew |
| ANSOM | Archives Nationales, Section Outre-Mer, Paris |
| BHS | Beverley Historical Society, Beverley, Massachusetts |
| BM, Add. Mss | Additional Manuscripts, at British Museum, London |
| *BR* | *Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government*, New Series |
| CCZ | Correspondance Consulaire et Commerciale: Zanzibar, at Ministère des Affaires Etrangères Archives, Paris |
| Cust. | Customs Records, at Public Record Office, Kew |
| EI | Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts |
| FO | Foreign Office Records, at Public Record Office, Kew |
| FOCP | Foreign Office Confidential Print, at Public Record Office, Kew |
| HSBA | Harvard School of Business Administration, Baker Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts |
| IOR | India Office Records, London |
| LC | Library of Congress, Washington, DC |
| MA | Maharashtra State Archives, Bombay |
| MAE | Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Archives, Paris |
| NAI | National Archives of India, New Delhi |
| NAW | National Archives, Washington, DC |
| OI | Océan Indien series, at Ministère des Affaires Etrangères Archives, Paris |
| PM | Peabody Museum, Salem, Massachusetts |
| *PP* | *Parliamentary Papers*, United Kingdom |
| PRO | Public Record Office, Kew |
| PZ | Correspondance Politique: Zanzibar, at Ministère des Affaires Etrangères Archives, Paris |
| RIHS | Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence |
| SCHR | Salem Custom House Records, at Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts |
| T 100 | American Consular Records, Group 59, on microfilm at National Archives, Washington, DC |

*Note*: For more details see Sources, pp. 259–65 below.

# *Glossary*

| | |
|---|---|
| Imam | Spiritual title of the Ibadhi ruler of Oman traditionally elected by the *ulema* and the tribal *shaikhs*. It declined in significance during the latter part of the eighteenth century with the secularisation of the Omani state, but was revived in the late 1860s. |
| Seyyid | Lord, used in Oman and Zanzibar to refer to the more secular ruler, and to members of the ruling dynasty. |
| Shaikh | Heads of tribal and clan groupings in Oman; also a term of respect used more generally. |
| Shamba | A Swahili word for plantation or plot of land. |
| Sultan | Secular title of the ruler of Oman and Zanzibar emphasising the temporal aspect of his position. |
| Ulema | Religious experts in Islam; played an important role in the election of the Imam in Oman. |

# *Currency and Weights*

## CURRENCY

**Cruzado** (Cr) A Portuguese silver coin with a fluctuating value: 1777: 3.75 Cr = 1 Piastre (see below); 1813: 2.60 Cr = 1 Piastre.[1]

**Maria Theresa Dollar** (MT$) A coin known as the Austrian Crown, the 'Black dollar', *Kursh* or *Rial*. Current on the East African coast until the 1860s when it began to be replaced by the American dollar. 1 MT$ = Rs 2.10–2.23 during the first half of the nineteenth century. £1 = MT$ 4.75. Spanish, Mexican *Piastres* or dollars and American dollars were exchanged at Zanzibar at 1 per cent to 6 per cent discount.[2]

**Rupee** (Rs) The Indian unit of currency. Before 1836 different parts of India had their own coins. The universal rupee was established in that year, but the value fluctuated until 1899: 1803–1813: 1 Spanish Dollar = Rs 2.38–2.14. 1841–1868: 1 Spanish dollar = Rs 2.10–2.18.[3]

## WEIGHTS

**Arroba** (Ar) A Portuguese unit equal to 14.688 kg.[4]

**Frasela** (Fr) A unit widely used along the East African coast varying from 27 lbs or 12.393 kg in Mozambique; 35 lbs in Zanzibar; 36 lbs on the Benadir.[5]

**Maund** An Indian unit, of varying weight. The Surat *maund* used to weigh ivory equalled 37 ½ lbs.[6]

*Sources*:

1. Freeman-Grenville (1965), p. 88; Milburn, Vol. 1, p. 60.
2. See p. 136 below. Milburn, Vol. 1, p. 198; Burton (1872), Vol. 1, pp. 324–5, Vol. 2, pp. 406, 418–19; MAE, CCZ, Vol. III, pp. 344–9; Bennett and Brooks (eds) (1965), pp. 477, 499, 534–5.
3. Phillips (ed.) (1951), p. 62; Milburn, Vol. 1, p. 116; Hamerton to Bombay, 3 January 1841, MA, 54/1840–1, pp. 20–2; Churchill to Bombay, 28 October 1868, MA, 156/1869, pp. 120–1.
4. Alpers (1975), p. xiv.
5. ibid.; Fabens to Hamblet, 10 October 1846, PM, Fabens Papers, II.
6. Milburn, Vol. 1, p. 159.

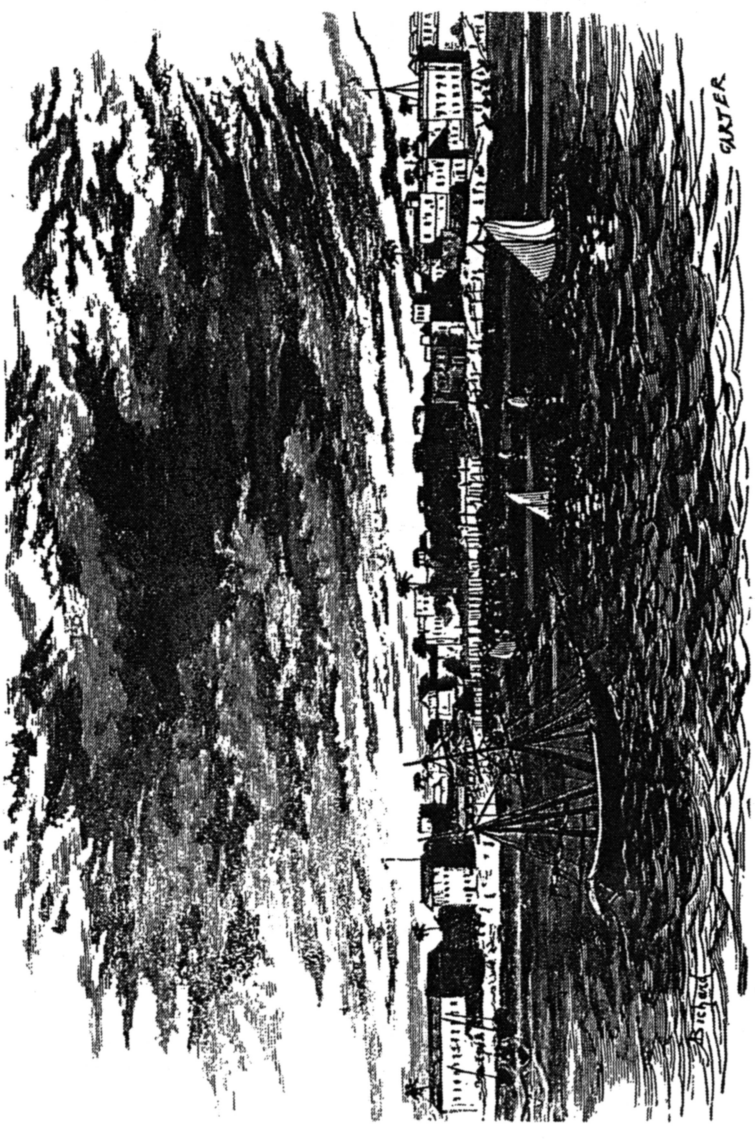



*Plate 1 Zanzibar from the sea, c.1857*

# *Introduction*

# *The Commercial Empire*

Zanzibar developed during the nineteenth century as the seat of a vast commercial empire that in some ways resembled the mercantile empires of Europe of the preceding centuries. Unlike them, however, it was developing at a time when capitalism was already on its way to establishing its sway over industrial production and was subordinating merchant capital to its own needs. In the capitalist metropoles this entailed the disintegration of merchant capital's monopoly position and the reduction of its rate of profit to the general average. It was thus being reduced to an agent of productive capital with a specific function: distributing goods produced by industry and supplying the latter with the necessary raw materials.[1]

But capitalism was simultaneously developing as a world system as it gradually drew the different corners of the globe into its fold. In this historic process merchant capital played a vanguard role. As a form of capital it shared the dynamism arising out of profit maximisation and the drive towards accumulation of the capitalist classes. This drive, therefore, pushed it to encourage constant expansion in the scale of production of exchange values without itself participating in actual production. Existing as it did at the periphery of the expanding capitalist system, it seemed to enjoy its pristine position and relative autonomy. Backward conditions here enabled it to monopolise trade and appropriate a handsome rate of profit that appeared to guarantee primacy to the merchant classes. That primacy, however, was illusory, for capitalism was close on their heels, subverting them step by step, and ultimately subordinating them to its own rule. In examining the history of Zanzibar during the nineteenth century, therefore, it is necessary to consider closely what Karl Marx termed the 'historical facts about merchant capital'.[2]

Zanzibar was essentially a commercial intermediary between the African interior and the capitalist industrialising West, and it acted as a conveyor belt transmitting the demands of the latter for African luxuries and raw materials, and supplying in exchange imported manufactured goods. Economic movements in East Africa from the eighteenth century onwards were primarily based on two major commodities and two

fundamental transformations. Increased Omani participation in Indian Ocean trade, particularly after the overthrow of Portuguese hegemony over their coastline, had given impetus to the emergence of an Omani merchant class which began to invest part of its profit in the production of dates using slave labour. To this important but limited demand for African slaves was added during the last third of the eighteenth century a substantial French demand for slaves to be supplied to their sugar colonies in the Mascarenes[3] and even to the Americas. But the period characterised by European mercantilism, of which the slave trade was an aspect, was rapidly drawing to a close. The strangulation of the European slave trade after the end of Anglo-French warfare in the Indian Ocean, however, provided an unexpected opportunity and a new lease of life to the slave mode of production in East Africa at the periphery of the world system dominated by capital. A vital transformation of the slave sector was therefore initiated during the first quarter of the nineteenth century as Arab slave traders began to divert slaves to the clove plantations of Zanzibar, and later to the grain plantations on the East African coast. Thus the sector was metamorphosed from being primarily one dominated by the export of slave labour to one that exploited that labour within East Africa to produce commodities to feed into the world system of trade.

The second economic transformation was activated initially by the collapse of the supply of ivory from Mozambique to India towards the end of the eighteenth century as a result of the rapacious Portuguese system of taxation. However, the ivory trade became a vibrant force with the enormous expansion of demand by the affluent classes of the capitalist West. The supply of such a commodity of the hunt demanded a constant expansion of the hinterland. So rapid was the growth in demand that throughout the nineteenth century it almost always outstripped supply, and resulted in a constant increase in the price of ivory. The price of manufactured imports, on the other hand, remained steady or even declined as a result of technological improvements and the development of the productive forces. These divergent price curves constituted for East Africa a powerful and dynamic motive force for the phenomenal expansion of trade and of the hinterland as far as the eastern parts of present-day Zaire. The extremely favourable terms of trade were able to cover not only the increasing cost of porterage but also to permit an enormous accumulation of merchant profit at the coast.

The trade of Zanzibar grew enormously during the first half of the nineteenth century as a result, but it owed its motive force primarily to the process of capitalist industrialisation and the consequent affluence of the well-to-do classes in the West. Through the export of ivory, cloves and other commodities, and the import of manufactured goods, it was therefore inevitable that the predominantly commercial economy of Zanzibar would be sucked into the whirlpool of the international capitalist

system and be subordinated economically, and eventually politically, to the dominant capitalist power.

As a mercantile state Zanzibar sought to monopolise the trade and appropriate the profit at the coast. An attempt was made to centralise the whole foreign trade of Africa from eastern Zaire to the Indian Ocean at the major entrepôt of Zanzibar; this included prohibitions on foreign merchants trading at the mainland termini of long-distance caravan routes from the African interior. This was particularly true of the Mrima coast opposite Zanzibar, which was reserved for local traders. On this system was constructed an elaborate fiscal structure that sought to squeeze a maximum amount of the surplus from the different stretches of the coast. The most heavily taxed area was of course the Mrima coast since it had little alternative except to use the entrepôt, while areas further to the north and south were induced to channel their trade through the commercial centre by lower rates of taxation. The system permitted the appropriation of part of the surplus by the Zanzibar state whose revenue rose more than sevenfold during the first seven decades of the nineteenth century.

The commercial system was also extremely profitable for the merchant class which, taking advantage of the highly favourable terms of trade, accumulated an enormous amount of merchant capital. Commerce, in fact, was so profitable that there was little inducement to divert that surplus from circulation to production except initially. Until the 1830s clove production was rendered attractive by the high prices of cloves as a result of the Dutch monopoly over the commodity, and many Arab traders did invest their profit from the slave trade in landownership. But with overproduction the plantations became a trap for the Arabs; they had invested much of their capital in them and now had little hope of a favourable return. For the Indian section of the merchant class, the declining profitability of clove production and prohibition against their use of slave labour, as British Indian subjects, meant that this avenue for investment was blocked except in the form of merchant and moneylending capital to extract much of the surplus that remained in that sector. In the process they undermined the landowning class economically.

In the interior merchant capital induced expansion of commodity production, diverting labour from subsistence production to hunting for ivory and slaves. The result was the undermining of the existing pre-capitalist modes of production. In his discussion of merchant capital, Marx showed that commerce – which has existed in all modes of production other than the purely subsistence-oriented natural economy – is not confined to exchange of actual surplus, but bites deeper and deeper into subsistence production, converting entire sectors of production into producers of commodities, making not only luxuries but even subsistence increasingly dependent on sale. Commerce therefore has an erosive

influence on the producing organisation. By subordinating production increasingly to production for exchange, it begins to transform the economic basis of the social formation originally founded primarily on production of use values, and sooner or later it disrupts the social organisation of production itself. It progressively dissolves the old egalitarian or feudal relationships, and expands the sphere of monetary relationships. It permits the emergence of a merchant class which begins to exert its apparently independent influence on the political economy of the social formation. Despite the fact that this class depends on the existing dominant classes which organise production, it undermines their economic as well as political position by constantly pushing for production for exchange and appropriating an increasing share of the surplus product. Although merchant capital undermines the existing mode of production, it is 'incapable by itself of promoting and explaining the transition from one mode of production to another.'[4]

In the case of Unyamwezi in what is now western mainland Tanzania, merchant capital contributed not only to the depopulation of elephants as they were killed for their ivory, but also of its people as the Nyamwezi turned to a life of trading to as far away as eastern Zaire, and to porterage to transport ivory and imported manufactured goods between the coast and the interior. In a sense it may have begun the process of dissolving the old mode and preparing it to be remoulded by colonialism as an underdeveloped area. It is not, therefore, commerce that revolutionises production but, rather, production that revolutionises commerce. Far from promoting the transition, merchant capital – which is dependent as preconditions of its own prosperity on the old classes that organise production, and on the old system of production – may play a reactionary role in preserving or buttressing the old classes and production system against change even while draining them of their vitality. It cannot by itself contribute to the overthrow of the old mode. Accordingly, Marx formulated the law that 'the independent development of merchants' capital . . . stands in inverse proportion to the general economic development of society.'[5] What new mode will replace the old one, therefore, does not depend on commerce but on the character of the old mode and, with the rise of the capitalist mode as a world system, increasingly on the impact of this vibrant mode from abroad.

The Zanzibar commercial empire that developed during the nineteenth century and encompassed much of eastern Africa was like its European predecessors in that it did not evolve elaborate administrative and political structures. Fiscal administration was provided by the custom master who farmed the customs for five-yearly periods. The Sultan had a number of governors at the major ports on the mainland, but his flag did not follow trade into the interior. The empire was largely sustained by the Sultan's monopoly over the coastal termini of trade

routes from the interior, and a system of common economic interests with the emergent merchant classes and chiefs in the interior to keep trade flowing. Such an informal system suffered from competition and contradiction between the merchant classes from the coast and the interior, leading to several wars. At the coast the state itself was subverted by its indebtedness to the most powerful group of Indian financiers and by the conversion of the Indian mercantile class into an instrument of British influence. But from the end of the eighteenth century the compradorial[6] state had also been politically dependent on Britain to protect itself from its rivals, particularly in the Persian Gulf, and to gain access to the British Indian market. By the middle of the nineteenth century it could no longer safeguard the political integrity of the Omani kingdom and prevent its partition between its Omani and African sections. This was a prelude to the partition of even the African section during the Scramble for Africa, and eventually to the subjugation of Zanzibar itself to colonial rule.

Previous historians of the East African coast tended to approach the subject of economic expansion during the nineteenth century with the empiricist tools of political history, ascribing to Seyyid Said, who presided over the commercial empire, all sorts of initiatives, and taking little account of the nature of the Omani 'monarchy'. They rationalised all economic changes then occurring in East Africa in terms of the economic policies of the most prominent political figure. Sir Reginald Coupland attributed to Said, among other things, the exploitation of Zanzibar for cloves, the expansion of the hinterland, the development of the Indian community to finance economic expansion, and the encouragement given to foreign merchants to trade at Zanzibar. Kenneth Ingham went so far as to assert that the history of East Africa was moulded by the personality of Said, arguing that the transformation of Zanzibar from a small and relatively unimportant village to the most important trading centre along the coast was 'almost entirely due to the initiative and powers of organisation of Seyyid Said.'[7]

As will be shown in the following analysis, many of the developments with which Said is credited were set in motion long before he first set foot in East Africa in 1827–8, although as a merchant prince, when he jumped onto the bandwagon, he gave that wagon a powerful push. But the argument against the Coupland–Ingham thesis is not merely empirical but also philosophical. As Marx shows, the theory that history is moulded by some 'great men' is but a variation of the idealist conception of history which began to develop with the division of labour at its highest stage, the division between mental and manual labour. Henceforth men's ideas appeared to emancipate themselves from their earthly roots, and to rise to the rarefied atmosphere of philosophical idealism, only to return to earth head first to impose a pattern, an order, on material conditions, and to attempt to explain historical phenomena with the help of their idealistic derivatives.[8]

*Plate 2 Seyyid Said bin Sultan, Ruler of Oman and Zanzibar, 1804–56*

In practice, as Marx shows, the attempt to prove the hegemony of the spirit in history involves, first, an effort to separate the ideas of those ruling from these actual rulers and thus to recognise the rule of ideas in history. Secondly, it involves bringing an order into this rule of ideas and proving a mystical connection between successive ruling ideas, thus providing the world of ideas with its own independent laws of development. Finally, in order to remove the mystical appearance, it involves personifying the various stages of development of the idea in certain philosophers and 'great men' who are seen as makers or manufacturers of

history. But as Georg Büchner aptly put it, 'the individual personality is only foam on the crest of the wave'.[9] He may betray the turbulence in the bowels of history but he is not its explanation. The explanation lies in the economic infrastructure of relations of production and exchange and the appropriation of the surplus product. On this foundation arises a legal and political superstructure to which correspond definite forms of social organisation,[10] such as the Busaidi state at Zanzibar.

# *Notes*

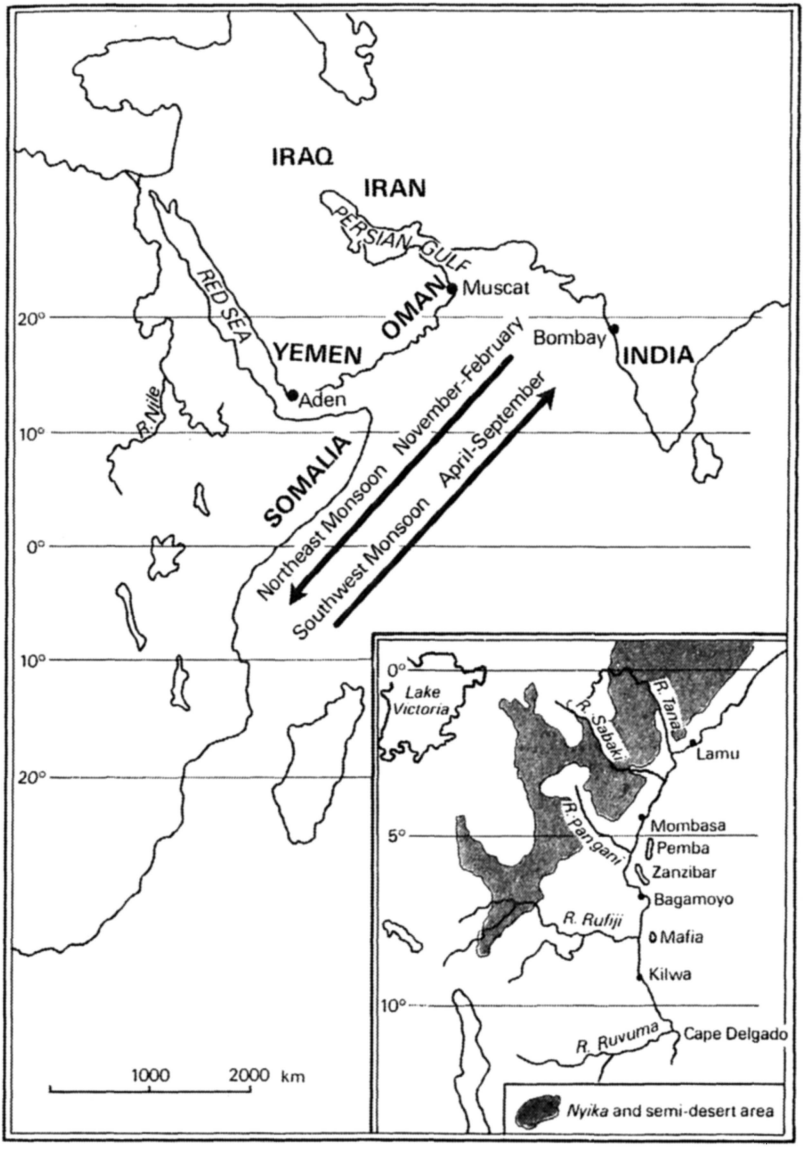
1. See Marx, Vol. 3, ch. 20; Mukherjee, ch. 3.
2. Marx, Vol. 3, ch. 20.
3. The Mascarenes refer to the small islands to the east of Madagascar. Under the French they were known as Ile de France and Bourbon. The former was renamed Mauritius after its capture by Britain in 1810; the latter was renamed Réunion.
4. Marx, Vol. 3, p. 328.
5. ibid., pp. 327–8.
6. *Comprador* is a Portuguese term for 'purchaser'. In the East it referred to brokers or commission agents, and in China to substantial agencies which carried out commercial activities on behalf of foreign traders and supplied their needs, and even workers to the trading factories. In Chinese Marxist literature the term referred to local agents of foreign capital or interests. See Yule and Burnell, pp. 243–4.
7. Coupland (1939), pp. 4–5; Ingham, pp. 19, 73, 80.
8. Marx and Engels, Vol. 1, p. 33.
9. ibid., Vol. 1, p. 50; Büchner quoted in Plekhanov, Vol. 1, pp. 608.
10. Marx and Engels, Vol. 1, p. 503.

# *One*

# *The Rise of a Compradorial State*

The East African coast was a part of the commercial system in the Indian Ocean for at least two thousand years. But its role in that system for most of that period was largely that of an intermediate zone of exchange between various producing and consuming zones around the ocean. Commerce, rather than production, formed the basis of the civilisation that flourished there. It was cosmopolitan and urbane; it was prosperous but compradorial. The coast was a zone of interaction between two cultural streams, one coming from the African interior and one from across the Indian Ocean, from which emerged a synthesis, the Swahili[1] civilisation, that at every step betrays its dual parentage. But that civilisation was mercantile. It gave rise to city-states that were like beads in a rosary, each forming a distinct entity, and yet threaded together by maritime communication and a common culture and language. Their mercantile ruling classes prospered from the middleman's profit which they cornered. They were utterly dependent on international trade, with no control over either the producing or consuming ends. The rhythm of Swahili coastal history was not internally generated but was synchronised with the wider rhythm of international trade in the Indian Ocean, and of some of the dominant social formations in that system.

The East African coast forms a fairly distinct geographical entity, bounded on the west by a belt of poor, low-rainfall scrub known in Kiswahili as the *nyika* (wilderness). The *nyika* runs just behind the narrow coastal belt in Kenya. Further south, it is more broken, being penetrated by the eastern rim of mountains and by river valleys which form corridors into the interior. The *nyika* recedes further into the interior, virtually disappearing in southern mainland Tanzania. The character of the narrow coastal belt, especially in the north, meant that it failed to provide an adequate productive base for many of the city-states, some of which were confined to offshore islands. Moving from north to south, however, there is a progressive enlargement of the immediate hinterland, and the




*Map 1.1 The western Indian Ocean*