Casting a long shadow: colonial categories, cultural identities, and cosmopolitan spaces in globalizing Africa

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This article explores the continuing hold that colonial categories still exercise in contemporary constructions of African urbanism—even in the context of a city being profoundly transformed by globalizing forces and processes. Since the mid-1980s, urban plans and programmes have advocated conserving Mji Mkongwe, Zanzibar as cultural property—a historic ‘asset’ or national ‘treasure’. Pressured by structural adjustment and external donors, the state has pursued a restoration strategy that entails opening the city to new flows of capital, selling off its stock of properties and promoting a new tourist economy. Paradoxically, the reconfiguration of property as private has been made possible by asserting its collective origins, as buildings have been classified as the material expressions of particular cultural groups, constructed as the heritage of bounded and essentialized wholes: Arab, Indian, African. In this transnational and cosmopolitan urban milieu, past discourses of anthropological culture and classification have strikingly come to the fore, perversely fusing ‘housing stock’ to ‘racial stock’, architecture and archetype. Past and present combine in contradictory ways, as outmoded anthropological concepts and practices have been resurrected in development discourse, cropping up in the most unexpected (and problematic) ways.

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Colonialism sought to exclude Africans from the domain of modernity itself, especially in the urban sphere. In some cases this entailed trying to bind Africans to rural zones of tradition, denying them rights to the city; in others, it involved efforts to contain or control urban Africans within bounded ‘native’ reserves, locations, or townships. But in either case, colonialism worked to deny the inherent dynamism and cosmopolitan character of African urban worlds, repressing or destabilizing the often creative spatial practices everyday residents deployed to negotiate the complexity of city sites and social lives. It was precisely these tactics of spatial containment that anticolonial movements vigorously opposed and worked to overcome (e.g. Fanon 1968, pp. 38-39). But

despite the claims of some postcolonial theorists, the process of getting past or beyond colonialism is as yet incomplete, and this is especially true in the space of the city. Part of this has to do with the enduring nature of the built environment, which, once established, continues to impact urban imaginations for generations. And yet the capacity of colonial categories to linger on also testifies to their ideological and conceptual tenacity—the way they are deeply rooted in a long history of Western ways of interpreting and (mis)understanding African urbanism.

In the case of contemporary Zanzibar, the unexpected combination and collision of past and present is one of the most remarkable features of the urban scene. Since the mid-1980s, a series of transnational conservation plans and programmes have centred on refiguring a section of Zanzibar city, Mji Mkongwe (Stone Town), as cultural property—treating it as a historic site, asset, and attraction that can promote a new tourist economy. Facing prolonged economic crisis and pressured by structural adjustment, Zanzibar’s Serikali ya Mapinduzi (Revolutionary Government) opted to pursue a development strategy that largely involved opening the city to new flows of capital, selling its large stock of confiscated properties and relying on external investment to rehabilitate valuable structures. As efforts to ‘restore’ the city have progressed, excluding long-term residents or exiling them to the periphery, it has become clear that the production of cultural patrimony and its privatization are intimately linked, raising pressing issues about who owns and has access to an array of urban spaces and structures.

Issues of culture and identity have played a critical role in preservation efforts, producing paradoxical effects on several levels. First, even as the state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have invoked indigenous culture and heritage as reasons to ‘save’ the city, conservation has largely involved driving local residents from their homes and converting them to other uses. And second, the reconfiguration of property as private under postsocialism has been enabled precisely by asserting its collective origins, as buildings have been classified as the cultural expressions of particular groups, constructed as the heritage of bounded and essentialized wholes: Arab, Indian, African. In an urban milieu strongly marked by globalizing forces and transnational flows, older (and outmoded) anthropological discourses of culture and classification have come to the fore, fusing housing stock to racial ‘stock’, architecture and archetype. Dramatic urban restructuring has produced a resurgence of colonial categories and practices in a postcolonial milieu where we would least expect to find them. Even during the colonial period, these terms were grossly inadequate to encompass and encapsulate the lives and struggles of urban Zanzibaris. And these colonial misrecognitions are only being compounded today, as the terms and tactics of urban ‘restoration’ utterly fail to account for or even grasp the intricacy of social relations and spatial practices in the city.

Remapping the city: race, space, and urban schemes

Cities have long served as images of modernity, mutable and dynamic; as cultural milieus they are constituted by what Ulf Hannerz (1992) has called the ‘urban
swirl’, and contemporary Zanzibar is by no means an exception. Stand on virtually any street in Mji Mkongwe and the recent impact of globalizing processes seems more than amply apparent. Indeed, Zanzibar encapsulates many of the social forms and processes that have engaged urban scholars in a transnational moment—intensified flows of people, commodities, and images; the permeability of the nation-state; the heightened salience of global capital and neoliberal ideology; hybridity and heterogeneity; cosmopolitanism; and rapid urban restructuring.

Nor is this anything especially new. Although often described as ‘ancient’, Zanzibar city was shaped by quite modern forces: merchant capitalism and colonial expansion—first Omani, then British. Trade and travel, movement and migration were central to its growth as an entrepot in the nineteenth century, as the island became a dynamic cultural and commercial nexus linking Africa to Asia, the Arab world, Europe, and America. Observers often remarked on the cosmopolitan character of the city (Firminger 1901; Lorimer 1917; Pearce 1920), even as the colonial state attempted over many years to create a dual city, setting ‘European or business quarters’ against the ‘native’ town, Stone Town against Ng’ambo, Arab against African, rich against poor, stone house against mud hut. However incomplete the impact of these policies remained, it was precisely these divisions and distinctions that the 1964 revolution aimed to overcome. More than anything else, the revolution represented a break with the past, Africanizing the city, curtailing links to the Indian Ocean world, and sharply restricting the circulation of goods, people, and ideas. And it is precisely these barriers and borders that have been so dramatically removed of late, as the revolutionary government has embraced economic and political liberalization, opening up the city to a host of globalizing influences.

What is most striking about the urban scene in Zanzibar today is not so much the way it embodies dramatic processes of change seen elsewhere, but rather how urban ‘renewal’ and ‘restoration’ coexist with the resurgence of older categories and frameworks. At the very moment the city is being dramatically refashioned on a variety of levels and scales, it is being simultaneously conceptualized and configured within a distinctly ‘traditional’ (and colonial) lens. The (re)construction of urban heritage has gone hand in hand with a revival of colonial classification strategies in the urban sphere—and yet consciousness of this fact seems strikingly absent in recent discourse and practice regarding Zanzibar city. This is all the more ironic insofar as these colonial terms have been revived by transnational consultants, investors, and donors who seem oblivious to the globalizing processes in which they are enmeshed.

From the initial United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) survey in 1979, outside architects and planners have devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to assess the condition and quality of the built fabric of the city.1 Most of this urban survey work, including the development of two complete conservation master plans, has centred on classifying more than 1,700 buildings using various criteria—historic significance, architectural worth, aesthetic values. Local residents were generally not involved in framing or debating these criteria, and indeed the lack of popular

participation in planning efforts was a striking feature of the entire process.2 Despite the diverse agencies and donors involved, a dominant discourse has emerged about cultural identity and architectural form. Indeed, it has become a kind of commonsense to depict the city in terms of its constituent ‘races’ (typically glossed as African, Arab, and Indian) and their impact on space. Preservationist discourse treats these identities as distinct, bounded, and unitary, arguing that they can be traced and mapped across the built fabric of the city.

In the context of postrevolutionary Zanzibar, this is a stunning notion. In a social milieu where cultural exchange and intermixture have been pervasive for centuries, and where transnational flows and fluidity are profound, why are bounded categories of race being reimposed on social space? How is it that archaic notions of heritage or tradition are being reimported in a context where they make little sense? And what can this misreading of African urbanism tell us about our current moment? While conservation is occurring in a globalizing milieu, it is simultaneously reproducing elements of colonial urban practice, ‘restoring’ history in ways that raise sharp questions about the status of the ‘postcolonial’. Throughout the colonial period, British officials tried to regulate and reorder the city as if it consisted of distinct worlds marked by clear differences in culture, character, physical features, and even building type. In Zanzibar, as elsewhere in the colonial world, sanitary obsessions and segregationist impulses motivated much urban planning (Swanson 1977; King 1990). In 1913, a leading expert in tropical hygiene, W. J. R. Simpson, surveyed the sanitary state of East African cities and stressed to the Colonial Office the necessity of separating what he called ‘the European or business quarters’ in Zanzibar from the ‘native town’, using the tidal creek as a cordon sanitaire.3 Public health and medical officers concurred in these fantasies, and thus the long search for a totalizing urban plan was born, driven by the logic of putting people in their ‘proper’ places: carving out a European quarter where none existed, separated from a distinct ‘Arab’ quarter, ‘Indian’ bazaar districts, and ‘African’ wards.

Of course achieving this rationalizing and racializing vision in a long established city like Zanzibar, with its hybrid population and intermixed layouts, presented real difficulties. Nearly a decade later, in the first complete urban scheme for Zanzibar, H.V. Lanchester seemed to acknowledge that the city was a surprisingly diverse and complicated space. ‘The population of Zanzibar is of a mixed character,’ he wrote, ‘to an extent unusual even in the East’ (1923, p. 15). But in the colonial world he believed that planners must ‘deal with particular communities as corporate bodies rather than as individuals’ (Lanchester 1923, p. 3). Falling into line with policies adopted by successive colonial administrations, he sought to fix the population into a select number of bounded and cohesive ‘communities’. In Zanzibar, he said, any urban planner had to deal only with ‘four main groups of inhabitants and their buildings’—European, Arab, Indian, and Native (ibid., p. 12). Without elaboration, the number of communities later expanded to six, and throughout Lanchester switched back and forth between religious, racial, and other communal markers. Echoing Simpson and

others, he represented ‘Stone Town’ as a ‘European and business quarter’, separated by the creek from something called the ‘native town’, making densely interwoven and intermixed neighbourhoods seem contained and comprehensible. Lanchester took this vision to absurd lengths, rewriting the landscape of the city to make it conform to his racialized colonial designs. In his planning maps, especially number IV (‘Racial Distribution’), he neatly redrew the city, constituting its population in the shape of bounded, separate, and homogenous communities.

More than anything else, the framework encoded in the map was a wilful act of colonial fantasy, presuming to dissolve complexity and intermixture into bounded enclaves that were easily located and assimilated. Drawing neat lines on paper allowed Lanchester to treat the city as legible and coherent, consisting of a limited range of groups. In this way he could make proposals to deal with ‘group areas’ in their entirety, resolving at a stroke the sociospatial ‘needs’ of collectivities. But this early inscription of apartheid was merely latent—a projection of how things ideally should be ordered according to colonial elites, rather than a description of how they actually were. The tax assessment files compiled on the owners and occupants of stone buildings in 1924 shows the wholly ideological nature of Lanchester’s map. These records reveal a strong degree of continuing intermixture in the neighbourhoods, streets, and even individual buildings of Stone Town, belying colonial efforts to fix racial boundaries and spatially enclose groups.

Lanchester’s vision of the city was by no means an isolated case. Similar schemas animated state practice and urban policy throughout the colonial period. No matter how consistently the ideology was maintained—for example, persistent efforts to associate ‘Africans’ with ‘huts’, to make this house form illegal in Stone Town, and to clear out all existing huts from that part of the city—it always remained more aspiration than actuality. Defining the ‘native’ on Zanzibar remained a vexed question that long tied the colonial regime in knots. Lines of identity were notoriously difficult to draw in hard and fast ways, and distinctions between ‘Arab’, ‘African’, ‘Swahili’, and ‘Shirazi’ were especially fluid and shifting (Fair 2001; Glassman 1995). The heterogeneous composition of the city resisted easy rationalization, and no mtaa (neighbourhood or quarter) ever became the exclusive preserve of particular groups, racial or otherwise. Then as now, the ruling imaginary was plainly contravened in both everyday life and the architecture of the city, which poses precisely the question as to how and why this framework is being reproduced in the context of the current moment.

It would be too simplistic to suggest that contemporary planners are simply reviving colonial discourse. And yet the convergence is indeed striking. In the wake of the revolution, after all, urban Zanzibar displays a high degree of residential heterogeneity, intermixture, and diversity—not only at the level of blocks or neighbourhoods, but even in the case of individual dwellings. In this respect, it far exceeds any American city that comes to mind. The sort of housing segregation on racial lines (not to speak of class) that is a routine feature of US urban landscapes long after the era of civil rights struggle (Massey and Denton...
1993) is utterly absent in the Zanzibari context. And yet there seems to be precious little recognition of this fact. The city continues to be conceptualized and treated in ‘traditional’ ways, fusing race and culture. How is it, then, that a classificatory system based in racial types has been restored to prominence as a framework for the city?

Conservation, classification, and the ‘value’ of culture

Since the early 1980s, successive teams of external consultants engaged in transnational conservation in Zanzibar have represented Stone Town—a space associated with the former colonial elite—as a collective cultural artifact, ‘a precious historical and cultural heritage of the Zanzibar people’, as the Chinese master planners phrased it in 1982 (Qian et al. 1982, p. 23). At the time, ‘Stone Town’ hardly existed as such; residents referred either to specific mitaa (neighbourhoods) or spoke of mjini (downtown); the English place-name was itself a throwback to the colonial period and had no popular currency. Architects and planners depicted Stone Town as a special zone of ‘cultural’ value—but the question was, for whom? From the outset, expatriate advisers argued that privatization was the only means to save the city. Selling structures would attract capital and make rehabilitation possible; in turn, a suitably restored Stone Town would serve as an attraction for tourists, reviving the economy. As the first U.N./ Habitat mission phrased it:

The Stone Town itself is a unique tourist attraction—an Arab casbah with a colorful past that is reflected in the varied historic buildings, the narrow bazaar streets, and the elaborately carved wooden doorways. The very name of Zanzibar evokes images of an exotic life in one of the major spice islands of the world. … Today, European and American visitors combine their safari vacations in Tanzania with week-long stopovers in the Seychelles. Zanzibar could easily compete with the Seychelles for this sun-and-sand segment of the package tours and provide, in addition, the historic and cultural attractions which the Stone Town has to offer. (LaNier et al. 1983, p. 10)

At the time, consultants were endeavouring to convince the government to alter its socialist course, arguing that only free markets could save the city’s architecture from continued decay. From the outset, however, the intersection of patrimony and privatization was attended by a number of contradictions. In the early 1980s, the state controlled approximately 60 per cent of urban properties, mostly residences that it could no longer afford to maintain (34 per cent of properties were state owned, plus another 27 per cent were state controlled through wakfs, or religious trusts administered by a state commission). Planners advocated selling off state-owned buildings to private interests, promising benefits to all concerned. Urban decay, they stressed, was largely coincident with the confiscation of properties under the revolution. As wealthier owners fled abroad, the state placed many ‘low-income’ tenants from Ng’ambo or rural areas in these structures, and the ‘dramatic increase in tenancy in the Stone Town
coincided with a sharp decline in the physical condition of buildings and in economic life’ (LaNier et al. 1983, p. 9). The planners believed that privatization would reverse these deleterious social trends. State control, lack of property rights, and communal spaces discouraged renters from taking responsibility for upkeep, they argued; the solution was to transform tenants into owners who would invest in their homes, stabilizing and preserving structures. And these sales would cut the number of buildings the state had to maintain, reducing the drain on municipal coffers while providing funds for additional conservation projects—generating benefits all around.

The planners had only the briefest acquaintance with the social realities of urban dwellers, and their analysis was driven more by free market ideology than any deep understanding of the actual causes of urban decline. Simply changing the social basis of ownership, as they advised, would do nothing to resolve the problem. Revolutionary tenants in numerous buildings had collaborated to fix or maintain collective spaces and pressed the state to make more serious repairs, especially after the monsoon rains. It was not that they ‘failed’ to assume responsibility for keeping up their homes because they had no stake; rather, they simply lacked the means to undertake structural rehabilitation. After two decades of state disinvestment in the urban core, older buildings had been weakened to the point of collapse, and the problems far exceeded the capacity of residents to resolve them. Nor was it likely, as conservationists advocated, that tenants could be transformed easily into hardy owner-occupiers by the magic of the market. If poorer residents lacked the means to make repairs, how could they be expected to purchase their homes? Above all, the external advisers seemed oblivious to the most obvious lesson that could be drawn from their analysis: if a rise in tenancy and low-income residents were at fault as they claimed, then the easiest ‘solution’ was to just clear them out and restore buildings to elite hands—which was precisely the class strategy that won out all too often in the years to come.

Privatization, in the end, never worked as its promoters vowed, nor did it produce the promised results. From 34 per cent in 1982, privately held structures in Mji Mkongwe rose to just below 50 per cent in 1992, and this number has only increased in the years since (Aga Khan Trust for Culture 1996, p. 82). The revolutionary government did indeed sell several hundred structures, but this privatization programme did not produce a class of resourceful owner-occupiers, investing in and lovingly restoring their homes. Indeed, while these structures were sold at advantageous prices with contracts requiring full restoration within a certain period, there was no oversight to ensure that these agreements were enforced. In most cases the initial ‘buyers’ purchased rights of access to or disposition of state properties that in fact closely mirrored the revolutionary-era leases they were supposed to replace. In both instances, the state granted deeds to citizens who lacked the means to maintain their properties or hold them in perpetuity. Political or social connections allowed favoured individuals to obtain exclusive rights to structures that could then be used as leverage in the market—turning around and transferring the rights of access to others in exchange for
kilemba, or hefty lump-sum payments. Many purchasers of state properties simply sat on the buildings they acquired for a time and then resold them, pocketing the appreciation as property speculation heated up.

Most revolutionary-era tenants, meanwhile, lacked any capital to buy their own homes. Even coping with sharp rises in urban rents was difficult enough, as residents were increasingly being priced out of the city. This dislocation was painfully ironic at multiple levels. Advocates of conservation had long argued that Mji Mkongwe deserved to be saved because of its social and cultural significance for indigenes, and yet urban renewal increasingly meant emptying buildings of indigenous tenants and transforming them for tourist use, backed by large infusions of external investment. Moreover, liberalization of the economy entailed public sector cutbacks, which undercut state efforts to regulate redevelopment. In this laissez-faire climate, many private buyers took the ‘free market’ to mean that they were free to do exactly as they liked with their new properties— maximizing profits, for example, rather than following preservation rules. Flawed restoration projects or significant violations of conservation laws became all too frequent, leading in some instances to further building collapses.

Genealogies of style: on origins and ownership

As Mji Mkongwe was being reconstructed as cultural property, questions of ownership became increasingly critical in many senses. Transnational donors and NGOs ostensibly deferred to the state, claiming that they were merely providing ‘technical’ assistance to a government that sought to save the city as a repository of history and culture, acting on behalf of the ‘Zanzibari people’. Global forces, in this view, were simply responding to local requests for aid, making expertise and resources available to support indigenous initiatives. But as with many development projects, this appealing portrait glossed over the more complicated realities of power. Conservation aid and assistance, after all, were explicitly conditioned on the state’s embrace of market forces and privatization, acting in concert with IMF-supported policies of structural adjustment. And the question of control was blurred in other senses as well.

Consultants predicted that conservation, like privatization itself, would serve as a rising tide that raised all boats: no one would lose out. Like free market promoters elsewhere, they downplayed any suggestion that some segments of the ‘Zanzibari people’ might be left behind when ‘their heritage’ was privatized and marketed in order to ‘save’ it. In this way conservationists sought to put their urban designs—and the free market more generally—on a politically palatable terrain. If the entire ‘community’ or ‘people’ stood to benefit from the recovery of a history and culture understood in unified and holistic terms, then these consultants had no need to concern themselves with who actually might end up owning and controlling rehabilitated structures—or who, indeed, might eventually be evicted and dispossessed. The planners consistently avoided any suggestion that conservation processes might be conflicted or contested,
intimately linked to broader questions of power and politics. This is highly ironic, for in other ways they were very interested in uncovering the ‘owners’ of buildings. But ownership in this sense was construed as having nothing to do with capital, class, or conflict in the present. Instead, it was firmly located in the past, envisioned in terms of quite traditional conceptions of ‘culture’ and ‘heritage’.

To grasp this dynamic, we must first understand how orientations toward the city have shifted significantly in contemporary Zanzibar. During the revolution, the state sought to overturn colonial inequities, directing resources to urban areas long denied them, especially in Ng’ambo, the ‘other side’ of the city. The revolutionary council was guided by a utopian enthusiasm for modernization, denigrating older structures as relics of the colonial past and vowing to erect gleaming new flats in place of ‘slums’ and ‘huts’. In the late 1960s, this impulse blossomed into ambitious Le Corbusier-inspired plans to construct miji mipya (‘new cities’) in model settlements throughout the islands. Hence, ‘new cities’ and ‘houses’ came to be contrasted with ‘old’ (-kongwe) structures or settings.

Neighbourhood names continued as before, but both in official documents and popular use different parts of the city began to be known according to the housing forms that predominated there. The city as a whole was spatially differentiated according to housing types or classes; instead of ‘Stone Town’ or ‘town proper’, say, reference was made to maeneo ya nyumba za mawe (‘areas of stone houses’) or nyumba kongwe (‘old’ or ‘outdated houses’), in contrast to nyumba za maendeleo, nyumba za Ng’ambo, or nyumba za serikali (‘development houses’, ‘Ng’ambo houses’, or ‘government houses’ respectively). This mode of spatial classification, it should be noted, did not treat zones as exclusive preserves or bounded domains. Old and new buildings could and did coexist in the same districts, combining in complicated ways to create the variegated historical landscape of the city. These categories specifically disarticulated race and place, reflecting the intermixed character of the built environment and the social changes wrought by the revolution.

But as conservationists began to survey the urban domain and classify structures according to their significance or value in the mid-1980s, a very different framework (re)emerged. Early on, like the Chinese, the UN-Habitat group singled out Stone Town for its historic value, defining the area as the ‘physical manifestation’ of a ‘rich cultural heritage’ (LaNier et al. 1983, p. 5). The way the planners framed issues of cultural origins and African identity was deeply intriguing. The city itself, they wrote, was a ‘cosmopolitan center’, produced through the confluence of ‘three broad cultural streams (Arab, Indian, and European)’, which had merged with ‘local African tradition’ to create an ‘exotic mixture of population and culture’. They depicted this cultural convergence in consensual terms, with no mention of plantation slavery, colonial violence, or inequality. The expatriate planners made it seem as if these so-called ‘cultural streams’ interacted with ‘local African tradition’ on an entirely equal footing, joining together to create an ‘exotic’ urban tapestry—a mystified version of coastal history suitable for a Disney spectacle. Yet when they actually turned to discuss the physical layout and appearance of the city, any specific

‘African’ influence or contribution to Stone Town abruptly disappeared; following a long tradition in the scholarship on Swahili cities, they emphasized Arab, Indian, and British influences on Zanzibar’s urban design and architecture.

Africans of diverse origin, of course, had supplied a good deal of the profit and most of the labour that had gone into the construction of Stone Town, and yet this critical contribution was hereby erased. In much of their work, conservationists reduced the multiplicity and diversity of the city to its most technical and tangible aspect: architecture alone. They separated the built fabric from present day social processes as well as the historical forces that had produced it, rendering it in terms of a collective cultural artifact. In this way, ‘culture’ was being quite literally materialized in commodified form while the politics of this revaluation were overtly denied. By framing the city in essentially aesthetic terms, the Habitat consultants portrayed conservation as a nonpolitical and necessary response in defense of a shared heritage. ‘The unique cultural heritage or patrimony of the Stone Town’, they warned, ‘is in danger of being lost. Rapid physical deterioration over the last twenty years has caused alarm both within the island administration and in the international community’ (LaNier et al. 1983, p. 5). And yet the planners’ portrait of the city as the product of a collective whole coexisted uneasily with their notion of distinct and bounded ‘cultural streams’ that had left clear imprints on the urban fabric: Arab, Indian, European, African.

This same tension was amply displayed elsewhere in conservation discourse and practice. Take, for instance, the ‘Strategy for Development in Zanzibar’ issued by the Aga Khan Development Institutions:

Zanzibar Town has always been cosmopolitan. … By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was home to a welter of different peoples—its merchants and landowning elites included Arabs, Swahilis, Indians, Europeans and Americans. ... Buildings in the town reflected this cultural diversity and Zanzibar was like no other stone town along the Swahili coast. Structures erected by multiple elites used the traditional building materials of Swahili stone towns—coral stone or rag, mangrove poles and lime mortar—but they also mixed in elements from the Omani, Indian and European cultures which converged there, and the Stone Town became the architectural expression of a unique cultural meeting point.

(Anonymous 1994, p. 1)

The text invokes Zanzibar as a cosmopolitan space, a cultural meeting place or point of convergence. But processes of cultural production, conflict, and transformation remain strangely unspecified, and in the end all we are left with is a ‘welter of different peoples’ with clearly delimited and bounded group identities. In the Habitat and Aga Khan master plans that have guided conservation initiatives since the mid-1980s we can see much the same logic at work. Both planning teams devoted significant resources to assess the quality and condition of structures in Stone Town; classification lay at the heart of the labour-intensive surveys they carried out. Breaking the city down into its constituent elements, they deployed a set of categories that were ultimately based in an older colonial geography and anthropology; drawing on the idea of ‘cultural
streams’, they traced Zanzibari architecture back to its racialized roots, discussing buildings in terms of their ‘Arab’, Indian’, ‘Swahili’, or ‘European’ origins.

Ostensibly seeking to respect indigenous tradition, conservationists were in fact reinscribing a long history of colonial precedents. The Aga Khan group, for example, analysed the built environment in terms of bounded cultures that had allegedly given birth to architectural forms. The planners identified 1,709 buildings in what they called the ‘historic area’: 1,453 ‘traditional structures’, 87 ‘traditional unknown’, and 256 ‘contemporary’. The first group received the vast majority of attention, coming in for more detailed analysis. The traditional structures were classed into distinct types, consisting of 654 ‘Indian’ shopfront buildings or houses, 426 ‘Arab’ structures, 92 ‘Swahili’ houses, 131 ‘European’ houses or civic structures, and numerous mosques, temples, and churches. The plan stated that buildings were categorized as such ‘according to their origin’ (Aga Khan Trust for Culture 1996, pp. 86-87). The external consultants seemed to believe that a search for roots or an originary source was appropriate in a ‘traditional’ urban milieu. In the context of rapid urban restructuring in Zanzibar, however, coding buildings in this manner seemed a throwback to an earlier era, a ‘restoration’ of colonial categories that made no allowance for historical dynamism or the complex and changing contemporary landscape of the city. In a real sense, ‘housing stock’ began to take on the aspect of ‘racial stock’, as ‘inherited properties’ took on new meaning.

After all, how precisely was the ‘origin’ of buildings understood? Neither the Aga Khan nor the Habitat group ever tried to document the detailed histories of individual structures in Stone Town, which is mostly contained in scattered _wakf_ (religious trust) files in the archives and shelves of dusty municipal records. Nonetheless, conservationists were motivated by a clear interest in genealogy in at least one sense. In essence, the external consultants read the outward and visual form of buildings much like phenotypical features, relying on elements of design or style to place structures in their ‘appropriate’ categories—which in the context of Zanzibar were routinely understood in racialized terms. The outer envelope of a building, then, was understood to be a clear sign of cultural content and character—a marker of its inner ‘meaning’.

By coding houses and tracing them back to the ‘cultural streams’ that allegedly spawned them, preservationists in Zanzibar were drawing on many of the same intellectual sources that informed colonial social science from the nineteenth century on. The Western study of Africa and much early anthropology were precisely framed around questions of race and culture, diffusion or independent invention. Indeed, when conservationists read buildings as ‘Indian’ or ‘Arab’, they were relying on an older ‘trait geography’ that seems especially ill suited to contemporary urban dynamics. As Arjun Appadurai observes, ‘Much traditional thinking about “areas” has been driven by conceptions of geographical, civilizational, and cultural coherence that rely on some sort of trait list—of values, languages, material practices, ecological adaptations, marriage patterns, and the like’ (2000, p. 7). Whether these approaches take more or less

sophisticated forms, they all typically conceive regions or cultures in terms of fixed ‘aggregates of traits’ that are understood as having more or less consistent properties and enduring historical parameters.

This is exactly the vision of cultural identity and influence that transnational planners and consultants drew upon in Zanzibar. Across the city, they sought to chart the imprint of race on space, tracing architectural forms back to an originary source—as if heritage was an inherited property, an essence transmitted through time and across space. Like the other types they deployed, for instance, conservationists marked an ‘Arab’ building as such in at least two senses. First, it could be traced back *in time* and assigned to the racial group that had once given shape to it as a distinctive cultural expression and form. The group was understood as maintaining a stable and consistent character through time, transmitting its inheritance down through the generations to the present. Second, the ‘Arab’ structure could also be traced back *in space*, linked ultimately to its ‘source’ in a host society—the places where Zanzibaris of Arab descent were understood to originate (Oman, Yemen) and where the stock or type of architecture might be said to exist in more ‘pure’ and ‘unadulterated’ form.

In this way, cultural relations in space and time were understood in terms of the transmission of traits through genealogy and/or across geography. But this archaic vision of the racialized lineage and affiliation of buildings utterly fails to address the crucial forms and processes that have produced and transformed urban Zanzibar and its architecture not just now but in the past. By relying on outward appearance as an indicator of origin and essence, conservationists have denied the possibility of more sophisticated ways of thinking about cultural identity and exchange. Architects and heritage practitioners have relied on a concept of culture that has been long abandoned in African studies and anthropology, blurring the lines between race and culture in problematic ways. Indeed, an enormous amount of critical energy has been devoted in recent decades to critiquing Western modes of othering Africa, and yet old categories continue to crop up in unexpected contexts, carrying colonial baggage. ‘For many, the no less definable term “culture” has become problematic for several reasons’, observe Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz. ‘The term seems to connote a certain coherence, uniformity, and timelessness in the meaning systems of a given group, and to operate like the earlier concept of “race” in identifying fundamentally different, essentialized, and homogeneous social units. … It also falsely fixes the boundaries between groups in an absolute and artificial way’ (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990, p. 9).

**Beyond tradition**

Conservationists could have drawn on other discursive frameworks to understand the city, but their notions of temporality and tradition favoured a more archaic approach. Recent work has shown how French architectural modernism was
influenced by urban styles in North Africa and elsewhere, inspired by the crisp geometry, subtle interplay of shape and void, and cubist vocabulary found there (Çelik 1997; Wright 1991; Rabinow 1989). Zanzibari styles can readily be seen in the same light: quintessentially modernist and modular, repeating and recombining a repertoire of forms in endlessly inventive ways, making for an architecture that is both richly diverse and highly adaptable. But conservationists—like Western donors, travel writers, and tourists—were drawn to the city precisely because of what they saw as its non-modern properties: its capacity to evoke Orientalist and pre-industrial imaginings, a site where travellers could ‘step back in time’ and enter ‘another world’.

A quite ‘traditional’ understanding of architecture as the cultural property of essentialized groups also seems consonant with the state’s strategy of using the city as an asset for economic development. To conservationists, dwelling form and style were seen as being the proprietary cultural property of those who were construed as owners and originators: Arabs, Indians, Europeans, and Swahili. These groups in turn were understood as the essential progenitors who had placed their distinctive cultural stamps or trademark characteristics on the structures ‘they’ created. Reconstructing heritage in the ‘cultural marketplace’ began to seem strangely akin to corporate brand management. And indeed the identification of authentic types of ‘traditional’ cultural production—the Indian shopfront, the Arab dwelling, the Swahili house—fits quite well with investors’ efforts to position the city as an exotic ‘casbah’, using reified notions of culture and history to distinguish Zanzibar from other sun and sea resorts in the global competition for tourist hard currency.

Conservationists, however, were driven by much more than economic interest; indeed, a far more pervasive and profound symbolic logic was in play here. After all, their approach was animated by precisely the preoccupations that had provoked early ethnologists such as Pitt Rivers, who relied on the ‘persistence of forms’ to follow common traits and establish cultural typologies in space and time. In Zanzibar, we can find clear echoes of the ‘genealogical method’ fostered by the Ethnological Society over a century ago, which ‘sought to trace the existing races of mankind back through a history of migration and differentiation … on the basis of similarities of physical type, culture, and above all, language’ (Chapman 1985, p. 21). If these concerns were rooted in nineteenth-century debates over the unity or diversity of humankind, they later resurfaced in the shape of diffusionist anthropology and culture historicism (e.g., Kluckhohn 1936). Many of the same assumptions, of course, gave shape to conventional archaeology in its diffusionist mode as well as standard architectural history (Bender 1998).

Nicholas Thomas has written about the rise of a ‘distinctively anthropological discourse’ in the mid- to late eighteenth century, ‘which registers a variety of human races or peoples, who are mapped and ranked . . . in an evolutionary natural history’ (1994, p. 71). Modernity, he writes, has in a real sense been an ‘epoch of anthropological typification’, and the roots of modern concepts of race and culture can ultimately be traced back to Buffon’s natural history:

While modern anthropology has succeeded Buffon and Forster, in the sense that it has both followed and displaced them, it remains, so far as constructions of human variety are concerned, a project after Buffon. Ideas of the distinctiveness of human varieties that were insecure or unintelligible before the mid-eighteenth century persist: usually, it is not that the Balinese is like this or habitually does that; the entity is instead pluralized, and it is Balinese culture that is analogous to nation or race, that is the bearer of peculiar attributes.

(Thomas 1994, pp. 94-95)

The cultural terms deployed by donors and planners have seeped out into a broader social terrain in Zanzibar, influencing state practice, tourist guides and productions, local elites, and heritage groups. Yet even as they are presented in value-neutral or aesthetic terms, these categories remain a remarkably impoverished means of analysing the historical dynamism of African social spaces. Buildings are complex commodities and over time they accumulate complicated social biographies, inhabited and reworked by cycles of investment, decay, and revaluation. In what sense then is it possible to suggest that a dwelling bears the stamp or conforms to the identity of its builder or owner? In the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, the wealth of the Omani elite largely derived from plantation slavery and the production of cloves. The profits from this activity went into the construction of imposing stone houses in the city, statements of social permanence and power. With the eclipse of agriculture and slavery in the later nineteenth century, many Omanis accumulated significant levels of debt, and large numbers of these dwellings passed into ‘Indian’ and ‘European’ hands, being modified and remade to suit new circumstances. In what sense then could they still be considered ‘Arab?’ And what violence does this privileging of ownership do to the labourers and artisans—slave, African, or other—who were responsible for the material construction and maintenance of most buildings? Just as their mud and wattle dwellings have been expunged from the urban fabric, should their vital contribution to the production of the city also simply be erased?

Even at the local level, this framework mystifies processes of urban formation, reifying the product while ignoring the social production of space. Zanzibari urban construction was typically a long-term and on-going process. Over time, mud dwellings were transformed into more permanent structures, adding stone to walls and finishing with coral rag plaster. And it was quite common for single-story ‘Swahili’ houses to be solidified and enlarged as means allowed, becoming multi-storied and substantial along ‘Arab’ lines. Similarly, the notion of architectural types fails to capture the cultural appropriations and exchanges that underlie much Zanzibari architecture. Many of the most significant public structures erected by the colonial regime were designed in the Indo-Saracenic style, following British notions of what Muslim monumental architecture should ‘ideally’ look like. And the grandest structure along the seafront—now the Museum of the History and Culture of Zanzibar—is the Beit el Ajaib, or House of Wonders, commissioned as a ceremonial palace by Sultan Barghash in the 1880s. Drawing on European engineering, it was conceptualized and received—hence the name—as a marvel of modernity. On seeing it in 1908, one English observer
described it as ‘an erection in the style of some Earl’s Court Exhibition building, in striking contrast to the old-time harem close by’ (Lewin 1908, p. 530). Zanzibar city, it was apparent even then, was no ‘stranger to the march of progress’. It is precisely the rich history of these hybrid borrowings and cultural appropriations that is being effaced by conservationists from the urban fabric in Zanzibar. Even as, at the same moment, quite similar processes are driving urban restructuring in the present. Colonial forms of knowledge are being repackaged in postcolonial guise, denying and displacing the modernity of African urbanism. And once again, the social lives and urban concerns of everyday Zanzibaris are being marginalized and misrepresented, their struggles to shape a meaningful future in the city pushed to the periphery—perversely enough, in the context of ‘development’ allegedly intended to preserve indigenous culture and tradition.

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Notes

1 The UNESCO report was part of an unsuccessful attempt to apply for World Heritage Site designation. The report found that the architectural fabric of the city had not been maintained with sufficient integrity to merit heritage designation—a decision that was reversed two decades later. The report did however single out seventeen buildings as architecturally significant and worthy of restoration. Since 1979 conservation efforts have largely entailed bringing back these monuments, diverting attention and resources away from housing shortages and deterioration that directly impact the lives of many urban residents. For the survey, see Commission of Lands and Environment (COLE), Zanzibar: COLE U.136/1 (Old) — KAM/UMM/5.

2 I asked the head of the Aga Khan group how he had developed criteria for evaluating structures. ‘There are no international standards,’ he replied. ‘Inevitably it involves personal assessment.’ Interview, Gianluca Rossini, 18 July 1994. Another member of the team concurred that expatriates were responsible for creating the categories by which buildings were assessed. Though in at least one instance, they took guidance from a local historian, designating the Friday mosque (described as ‘a box’ by Rossini) as significant due to ‘community’ sentiment. On the lack of popular participation in planning efforts see Bissell (1999).


4 European residents represented a tiny minority in the city. Population statistics from 1921 indicate that only 270 Europeans lived in the islands. In the city, they were not exclusively concentrated in space, and elsewhere Lanchester admitted that the ‘European quarter is merely an occupation of the southwestern end of the Arab city’ (Lanchester 1923, p. 13). Moreover, he made it clear that this ‘occupation’ was spread pretty thin on the ground, writing that Zanzibar
was ‘exceptional among tropical towns in that hardly any houses have been built for Europeans’, most of whom were forced to find lodgings in long established neighbourhoods with non-European neighbours (ibid., p. 67). The notion of a ‘quarter’ had no foundation in social or spatial reality.

5 See Tax Assessment Files, Baraza la Mji (Municipal Council), Zanzibar.

6 Aid to socialist Tanzania, for example, was restricted by the US Congress in the early 1980s, as Nyerere and his support for *ujamaa* socialism and African liberation movements were distinctly in disfavour during the Reagan years. This hampered early attempts to attract conservation funding to Zanzibar, and it was only when thorough-going liberalization policies began to be implemented in Tanzania that the purse-strings were loosened.

7 The segmented nature of transnational conservation projects provided ways for both the state and external consultants to distance themselves from taking political and moral responsibility for displacing long-time residents. When I questioned state officials, for example, about specific instances of cleared buildings, they typically stated that they were required to remove residents by the aid conditionalities established by outside donors. Questioned about the same projects, however, outside conservationists said they had no knowledge of or involvement in any clearances, arguing that they were simply handed empty structures by the state, and any issue relating to local residents was an indigenous matter over which they had no control or oversight.

8 Beginning in the nineteenth century, Western observers typically sought to make sense of urban Zanzibar’s heterogeneous populace by breaking it down into recognizable ‘types’, creating portraits of ‘the African’ or ‘the Arab’ in which appearance, character, and racial origins were tightly linked to clothing or house form, as if they were all part of an inherent complex—precisely the sort of bounded cultural wholes so beloved of a later anthropology. See, among others, Burton (1872), Christie (1876) and Pearce (1920).

9 Preservation teams never included historians or anthropologists and consistently neglected culturally engaged research—yet another way that recent efforts have echoed colonial practices. A few landmark structures or monuments were documented more thoroughly, but carrying out this work with regard to the vast majority of dwellings was consistently understood as outside the scope, budget, and expertise of the master planners and consultants. For treatment of the Ithnasheria Dispensary, see the article by Steven Battle in Sheriff (1995).

References


