



THE *LONGUE DURÉE* IN THE WESTERN
INDIAN OCEAN:
TRANS-OCEANIC SOCIO-CULTURAL
INTEGRATION. A PROGRESS REPORT
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Abdul Sheriff was born and educated in Zanzibar. He studied at the University of California at Los Angeles and at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (Ph.D. 1971). He has been a Visiting Professor or Fellow at the universities of Wisconsin (1974/75), Minnesota (1991), Hamburg (1992), the Centre of the Modern Orient, Berlin (1994, 1997), Bergen (1996), Lisbon (1998), Humboldt (1998), and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (2002/03). He taught history at the University of Dar es Salaam from 1969 on. In 1993 he was appointed Advisor and Principal Curator of the Zanzibar Museums. He also served as member of the South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS 1995–2001) and as Chairman and Member of the Presidential Committees on the State University of Zanzibar (1995–2002). Professor Sheriff has published and edited a number of books, including *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar*. London, 1987. *Zanzibar Under Colonial Rule*. London, 1991. *The History and Conservation of Zanzibar Stone Town*. London, 1995. *Historical Zanzibar: Romance of the Ages*. London, 1995. *The Architecture of the Stone Town of Zanzibar*, London, 1998, as well as numerous scholarly articles. His current research interest is in the Dhow Culture of the Indian Ocean. – Address: P.O. Box 116, Zanzibar, Tanzania.

The long and fruitful academic year at the Wissenschaftskolleg, away from the cares, distractions, and frustrations of my professional work at the Zanzibar Museums, is sadly coming to an end. It is an appropriate moment to draw up a balance sheet of what I have been able to accomplish against the perhaps wild expectations that I, and many others, may have come with.

I had come here with the hope of finally writing a book on the *longue durée* social and cultural relations across the western Indian Ocean, a subject that I had often skirted in my other writings, but that I always wanted an opportunity to give a full hearing once and for all. At the same time, I had come fresh from a museum project in Zanzibar that I could not leave behind altogether. In fact, my first contribution at Wiko was a presentation to the Museum Forum on our ideas for the new museum in Zanzibar. I had the good fortune of having a powerful critique from the late and lamented Professor Albert Wirz, whose demise a few months later has left a deep gap in African studies and a gaping hole in the hearts of many of his students, colleagues, and friends.

The two projects, fortunately for me, were not contradictory since, perhaps not surprisingly, the specific exhibition we have at hand in the House of Wonders Museum is on the Maritime Culture of the Indian Ocean, for which we have just received financial support. It includes the construction of a life-size boat, a *Mtepe*, which is now extinct, in which the planks were sewn rather than nailed, and which had a very distinctive shape and which is rich in Swahili folklore. My job just before coming here was to do the research on the method of construction and to find all the illustrations; and in February 2003, I had to go to Lamu in Kenya, its original homeland, to find the *dhow* builder whose grandfather had built one. The *Mtepe* is now under construction on the Zanzibar seafront, and I had to follow its progress from a distance through e-mail, which was not easy, intervening when I felt it was not being done according to the plans. It is expected to be launched in October.

The book project turned out to be far less manageable, precisely because the resources accessible to me in Berlin were far richer than I had expected. Although I had wanted to synthesize the social and cultural history of the western Indian Ocean over the *longue durée*, when I drew up my plans a couple of years ago, I had been more modest about what could be accomplished within ten months. As I then put it in my application to Wiko, it was “to concentrate in particular on the past two centuries, for which documentation is more abundant and oral information can be more reliably applied.” Faced for the first time in many years with the unrivalled library resources available to me in Berlin that may not be accessible to me again, I could not resist the temptation of exploiting them to the full for a truly *longue durée* synthesis. Therefore, as I am wont to do, I began at the beginning, from the first century of the Christian era, when documentary and archaeological evidence begin to be available for the Indian Ocean as a whole and for the East African coast in particular. Although I had already collected a lot of data and had even written some rough drafts for

the later period, effectively I could synthesize my data systematically only down to around 1500.

I do not regret having done this, nor am I one to blame the knife for the crime, as was brought out in Cornelia Vismann's presentation. As I said in my presentation at the Tuesday colloquium, for me, the library was the jewel in the Wissenschaftskolleg crown. Coming from a situation where there is hardly a library worth talking about beyond my own small personal one – and even when I had access at foreign libraries, I had to struggle to find the obscure materials that historians are condemned to do – the library facilities provided by the Wissenschaftskolleg have been little less than heavenly. I do not know if the library keeps individual counts of the number of requests; the average seems to be about 200 per Fellow, but I must have exceeded it; and although I did not myself keep count, I can say that I probably got more than 95% of the material I asked for from all over Germany, and some even from France.

Nevertheless, about two months before the end of my time here, I faced a crisis, a moment of reckoning. While the work before 1500 was an essential background in the evolution of the overall patterns of economic and socio-cultural relations across the western Indian Ocean, it is from the more recent centuries that we begin to get the intimate personal details to add socio-cultural flesh and blood to the skeleton of interactions and movement of people across the Indian Ocean that engendered cosmopolitan societies around its rim. In a moment of desperation, I did consider whether I should devote the rest of the time to a rewriting of the text to cover the whole theme for the general public. It could have been based on the work already done here and the incomplete data and drafts that I already had for the later period. Such a work had been strongly urged on me by many friends, who felt that my stuffy scholarly work does not reach the broader public that is interested in the question I am grappling with.

In the event, I decided to consolidate my synthesis for the period before 1500 and to devote the rest of the time to reading and photocopying as much as I could for the period after 1500 for later gurgitation during my spare time in Zanzibar, because these sources will not be accessible to me later. The material for this period is more voluminous, and I am sorry to say that I have not been able to do as thorough a survey as I was able to do for the earlier period. I hope that I have not abused the privilege of photocopying material to take to Zanzibar. In mitigation, I can only say that I will put the material to good use in the completion of the project begun at Wiko. When I get back to Zanzibar, I will naturally get sucked into the on-going museum project that will keep me busy at least until

December 2003. However, I hope that beginning early next year I will get more free time to get back to my manuscript, and I may well start with the text for the general public to map out the overall outline of the argument.

Having gone through the year, I must admit that although the theme proved to be of great interest to some of the other Fellows when I finally expounded it toward the end of the term, throughout the year I was working in isolation to a considerable extent. The Wiko philosophy of bringing together all branches of knowledge under one roof to permit cross-fertilization of ideas and methodologies was certainly interesting. I used every opportunity to try to understand what my colleagues in other fields were doing and where the frontiers of knowledge were in their respective fields; and I even read some books in the other disciplines that I had not touched in 30 years. Nevertheless, I felt I lacked a critical mass of people close enough in our undertakings to carry on a sustained discussion, until the second half of the term when Hilda Sabato joined us. She certainly enlivened the small band of historians, and through her initiative, a group, including an anthropologist, was born. We had a series of discussions on historiography and collective memory, and it may grow into something of a longer duration than the year at Wiko.

This sense of intellectual isolation was also partly broken by my interaction with the Indian Ocean group at the Zentrum Moderner Orient and by visits to several other universities, where I was invited to give a talk on my research at Wiko. They included the Humboldt University, where I had taught for a term a few years ago, and Heidelberg, Leipzig and Hanover during the last month of my stay in Berlin. This was a very good opportunity to interact with historians across the country, who raised many questions and offered many new insights.

Lest I leave an impression that I was too isolated at Wiko, I must say that events beyond the walls of Wiko – in Iraq, to be specific – brought many of us close together across our disciplinary boundaries. Many were the heated breakfast and lunch sessions where we found common grounds for an approach to a hyperpower unwilling to be restrained by international law, conventions, and world opinion, and to the first case of a pre-emptive war, which may well characterize the new century. We solved many world problems at those sessions, though most of them will still be with us for a long time to come.

I did face one other major problem, and although it was quickly solved, I should perhaps elaborate so that the administration and the Fellows can consider whether it is necessary and possible to make a provision for it in the future. I had come with three enormous registers of *dhow* movements that I had discovered in Mombasa in 2002, which I needed to

computerize in order to analyze and use the data in my writing. If I had had to do it myself, it would have consumed many weeks of my valuable Wiko time. However, there was no provision for research assistance. I must thank Dr. Nettelbeck for applying to some foundations on my behalf, and when that did not yield good results, he found a solution within the Wiko framework to facilitate my work. So the question that I leave with is whether other Fellows felt the need or could have used such research assistance to facilitate their work and maximize their opportunity here.

Finally, I must take this opportunity to acknowledge my gratitude to Wiko and its staff for making the year so pleasant and fruitful. The best thing that I can say about the administration as a whole, in contrast to my own experience in Zanzibar, is that, apart from the first weeks, when they had to guide us in the ways of the Kolleg and of Germany, it was there but almost invisible, which should be the goal of all administrations. It did everything that could have been expected of it, smoothly and without being a hindrance. I must also mention the very considerate staff of the restaurant, who took very good care of us, despite our bewildering dietary requirements, and always with a smile.