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Words: 1,235 approx.

ZANZIBAR, A GARDEN OF EDEN GONE TO WEEDS

by VIRGINIE PRICE

Zanzibar's lush tropical vegetation, with its rich greens and leafy canopies, quickly seduces any visitor. The variety of crops on the island is surprising. Everything seems to grow -- spice trees, rambutans, durians, mangoes, and an impressive array of other tropical delights.

Although you can find this abundance on the island, it soon becomes apparent that crops are not cultivated to any great extent and that there is an enormous gap between the island's agricultural potential and its actual production. The number of untended plots, abandoned plantations, and hectares of land left fallow testify to a deteriorating -- not a growing -- resource.

Zanzibar is a small island of the East African coast, economically dependent on mainland Tanzania with which it is also politically united. Most of its 1660 square kilometres of land is very fertile. Rainfall is abundant and well distributed throughout the year, and groundwater supplies are plentiful. The island's topography also favours agriculture: the land is level and the soil is easily plowed except in the coastal coral regions where the ground is rough and rocky.

The climate is also well suited to the cash crops such as cloves, nutmeg, and cardamom on which the island's economy has been based for many years. Although it would be possible to grow other crops, irrigated rice or other staple foods for local consumption and export, Zanzibar is not self-sufficient but must import foodstuffs at great cost.

The clouded agricultural picture is closely linked to the land-use practices on the island. Before the 1964 revolution and union with Tanzania Zanzibar's land was in the hands of a few powerful families, mainly of Arabic, Chirazi (people of Persian origin), and Indian descent. The large farms were managed as plantations. Cloves and other spices were the most important crops and fit in well with Zanzibar's thriving trading life. Zanzibar was then a wealthy, bustling centre.

But only a few benefited from this prosperity. The majority of Zanzibaris were landless, and either lived on sections of land leased or borrowed from a landlord, or survived as fishermen or tradesmen. Few actually worked on plantations because cheap labour was imported from mainland Tanzania.

In 1964, the year of the Revolution and Independence, the situation changed drastically. Soon after the Sultan's overthrow, a program of land reform was instituted. The government confiscated all lands and distributed them among the landless. Every man had the right to own a three-acre plot, and former landowners were reallocated portions of their land according to the number of people in their families -- and their political affiliation. The government kept many of the large and prosperous properties intact, however, and large tracts of land bearing coconut palms for copra production, clove, nutmeg, cardamom, and sugar plantations, grazing land for dairy herds, and rice valleys are now under government management.

This somewhat random system of land redistribution has not proved satisfactory, however. A great deal of prime agricultural land was allotted to the politically favored, to speculators, and to city dwellers who had no intention of tending their plots. Every year since 1964, the government has therefore tightened the controls on land distribution. Today, an applicant for land must first ask permission from the party chairman of his village for temporary use of an unoccupied plot. A crop inspector from the Ministry of Agriculture will later assess whether or not the land has been put to good use. The government has recently begun reclaiming unused land. Nevertheless, more than a third of Zanzibar's land is covered with weeds...a garden of Eden left fallow.

The three-acre limit on land ownership has also posed problems. Farmers must support their families on parcels of land barely large enough to meet their needs. Staples are grown intercropped in combination: cassava, yams, sweet potatoes, and a few vegetables. Any surplus production is sold, but farmers do not set out to plant crops for market. In years of shortages, they make do without a cash income and wait for better times. The pattern does not change, as the farmers do not practice crop rotation, nor do they readily accept new improved cropping methods... there is no room for experimentation or the risks that accompany it.

It is the "imported" labourers from mainland Tanzania who supply markets with fruit and vegetables. Unlike the local islanders, they are experienced cash crop farmers. They rent land and interplant crops that have a market value: cucumbers, pumpkins, groundnuts, ginger, pepper and other spices, bananas, citrus and other fruit. But as they only occupy the land on a temporary lease there is little concern for proper management of the land. Permanent tree cover is not properly maintained, nor are crop rotation and soil preservation practices followed. Crops follow one another according to the seasons, not long-term agronomic or resource-conserving considerations. It is little wonder that the returns from the clove tree, the "Atlas" supporting Zanzibar's economy, are decreasing each year.

In the coral regions, land use practices are as different from the rest of the island as is the land. Farmers in central and northern districts are blessed with rich soil, abundant rainfall, and good access to markets. The dry and rocky coral regions are covered with brush, and are remote from trading centres. Yet this unfavorable appearance is deceptive, and farmers in this area prosper.

The farmers in the coral region are shifting cultivators, following a fourteen-year rotation. Brush land is cleared by a team of families. Trees are removed, sized, and sold as building poles: the larger trunks are used to make charcoal or to form pyres on which coral rocks are heated to produce limestone, twigs are sold as firewood, and tree stumps are left in the fields to provide supports for climbing legume crops.

Land is divided by stone walls into smaller parcels which are cultivated for four years. During the first year, maize, sorghum, or millet are planted in October, followed in March by a pea, bean or lentil crop. Another cereal, and vegetables such as tomatoes or eggplants are added as more land becomes available. The second year follows a pattern similar to the first. During the third year, tuber crops, bananas, and pawpaws are planted. At this stage field maintenance is abandoned... the crops are harvested and brush once again takes over. For the next ten years the plot will remain untouched to regain its fertility.

Most of the harvest is destined for home consumption, but farmers in the coral regions earn an income from the sale of wood, charcoal, and limestone. Accustomed to extracting the maximum from their land, these farmers present a sharp contrast to those of the better endowed -- but poorly exploited -- areas.

For many years Zanzibar has been living on its capital, resting on the past glory of its spice economy. The clove plantations are old now, and have not been rejuvenated. The government has only just begun to emphasize the need to diversify the island's agriculture, and produce crops that will either reduce the need for expensive imports or bring in export revenue.

Before the government of Zanzibar can expect farmers to adopt its diversification programs, however, the benefits and disadvantages of the 1964 land reform need to be assessed, and action taken to remedy problems that have arisen. One solution might be reclaiming all abandoned land and allowing interested successful farmers to expand their operations. Only then will the island's land resource be well used, and only then will Zanzibar's agricultural economy reflect the island's natural bounty.

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IDRC-F107e

April-May 1979

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