

Memories of Zanzibar – George Periera

The relevance of this lies in the outline of a community now dismembered and scattered across the globe but for whom strong memories unite many

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On Tue 30 Mar, 2021, 22:28 Hazel Cardozo, <cedarsel@yahoo.com> wrote:

George is the Youngest Son of "Teacher Pereira" a Widowed Mom

brother of Sisters Yvonne (wife of Wolfango Durado)and
Irene Pereira

St Joseph Convent School 1930 -60

Zanzibar

Class of 1950 - 51... !!

Why I shall Always Love Zanzibar by George Pereira

[Memories of Zanzibar List 1 of 4 - by Ives \(George\) Pereira](#)

To me, Zanzibar was the ideal place to have been born and raised in.

<https://zanzibarsogas.blogspot.com/>

For one, it was a small little town; small enough to have been called **a village**, judging by its size.

Its **multi-cultural** population added **spice** to an otherwise boring life. What made it very cozy was not only that the whitewashed buildings appeared to be hugging each other but that the people were unreservedly generous, tolerant of each other and warm. Above all, it was the lack of sophistication of the population that made it so welcoming and an ideal place on earth. Perhaps it was the best place on earth.

There were many distinct communities in Zanzibar,

The Africans, who were by far the majority, lived primarily in an area called “Gambu” where they built their huts and lived peacefully within their own culture which had now become an amalgam of Arab and Swahili culture. This culture was understandably influenced by Islam and so it borrowed appreciably from Arab culture. The Muslim Arabs were the carriers of Islam wherever they went. Occasionally, the Africans held their “Ngomas” (dancing to the haunting sound of African drums.) The majority of Africans were Muslims and like most Muslims in Zanzibar, they were consciously polite and gentle people in spite of the general poverty that was endemic. In fact, the language itself reflected the politeness and gentleness of the people. “Swahili” in its dynamism, also assimilated many words from other languages but particularly from Arabic and Hindi words. The Africans, though in the majority, had few twentieth century skills during the early years of growing up on this island. This was probably due to their lack of formal schooling which had to be paid for. There was no free public education at that time. They usually took up jobs as “domestics” in households, or did menial tasks such as the ones offered to them by the municipality or the Public Works Department. Many were in construction and they were generally relegated jobs that involved heavy lifting. Some of the Africans lived on small pieces of land outside the town boundary and lived a subsistence life growing cassava and sweet potatoes, and raising chickens and goats. Others took up to fishing in the very generous Indian Ocean that hugged and embraced the shores of Zanzibar. Extra fish that were caught were sold at the busy local fish market and one was always assured that the assortment of fish on display would be fresh since they were taken from the pristine Ocean the night before. Refrigeration was unknown then and so the fish had to be sold as quickly as possible in order to maintain their freshness. I recall that one way to tell whether fish were fresh was to open up the gills. If it was a bright red it might be considered safe for eating. As in most developing countries the customer was expected to bargain since the initial asking price was usually very inflated. Bargaining had a cultural component to it. Good bargaining techniques came with years of practice and involved a whole lot of acting and body language that conveyed messages of dissatisfaction, disapproval, walking-away- from-the- deal, or final acceptance expressions. If a customer chose not to bargain he might be considered “foolish” or “retarded”. He might also be considered an ignorant foreigner.

Other Africans worked for wealthy Arab land owners in possession of vast clove and coconut plantations. During the year, the workers were occupied in weeding large tracks of land, and during the picking season, they were up the trees picking cloves or coconuts which were then dried and stored in large burlap sacks for export to places **like Russia, India and other countries. The export of cloves and copra were the chief cash crops of Zanzibar.**

Many Africans also worked the Port area and helped in the task of loading and unloading ships. In those far off days, large goods were transported by “hamali carts”. These were long carts on four wheels, steered by one strong African while the others pushed vigorously at the cart from behind to keep it moving. There were no brakes on these carts so that accidents were liable to take place particularly if the crew operating the carts were irresponsible or in hurry to avoid late

deliveries.

Another large group in Zanzibar were **the Arabs**. Arabs were generally **from Yemen**.

The Sultan **of Oman (ARABIA)** was appointed the Sultan of Zanzibar through a treaty with the British.

Consequently, most of the land and houses were owned by Arabs. The Arabs were Muslims. Since Zanzibar society was fashioned around the manorial system as practiced in Europe in the Middle Ages, the Arabs could well be compared to the Lords of the Manor. The serfs were the Africans, and I am sure that there must have been a quiet resentment among the Africans since they were paid a subsistence wage for all the hard work that they performed. It was very rare to see an Arab in the retail business or working as civil servants. The skills and the enthusiasm or the patience for desk jobs were just not there.

The Government of Zanzibar, however, was Arab dominated. Eventually this was to change after the Revolution in the sixties.

As you might expect, **Indians from India** was a sizeable group in Zanzibar. However, this was a very heterogeneous group. Some were Muslims and represented different sects in the Islamic world. Of these groups, the Bohoras, the Ithnasheries and the Ismailis were the largest groups. Most of the Indians were shop keepers and ran a variety of businesses from car sales to selling local and imported produce. For all practical purposes, Zanzibar town looked very much like little India. Most businesses were owned by Indians who generally lived within the confines of the town. This must have been a source of quiet resentment among the indigenes who always viewed the Indians as foreigners and were considered exploitive in their business practices.

The Goans, who **refused to be called Indian** at this time, were **another distinct group**. Having migrated from Goa where there was an entrenched Portuguese Colonial government, the Goans felt that they had an edge over their Indian counterparts in as far as they were Christians like their British masters and most of them were fluent in English made even more so by the efforts of the **Sisters of the Precious Blood who ran (??) St. Joseph's Convent school**.

Catholics were forced (??) to join this school failing which, their salvation was rumoured to be in jeopardy. Most Goans chose to err on the side of eternal salvation more out of the fear of eternal damnation rather than conviction.

The Goans were **favoured by the British** and **given priority in joining the civil service**.

This was in great part due to the **innate honesty of the Goans**; their ability to work hard and their **loyalty to their British bosses**. They were cut out to be excellent civil servants. A book written by a British civil servant entitled, "The Isle of Cloves" devoted an entire chapter to the contributions that Goans were making to their adopted country and revealed that without the

Goans the British bosses would probably be in limbo with regard to their responsibilities. The author of “The Isle of Cloves” was promptly transferred out of Zanzibar for being on the side of truth.

****** British Colonials referred to this kind of transfer as a promotion. British Colonialism was synonymous with the Russian Gulag.**

Wherever the Goans have gone, it would seem that before long, they would get themselves institutionalized. This sounds very innocuous. What I mean is that Goans have always felt the need to band together and form an association. Legend has it that a Goan Association (call it a Club if you must) was a necessary component of Goan life because it gave them an opportunity to meet, expand their friendships, tear down reputations and preserve their “Goanness” whatever that might be. To some it meant the preservation of Konkoni while to others it probably meant the exchange of Goan recipes that were bound to bring disparate groups of Goans together. Finally, it was hoped that through social interaction, children could ultimately find their mates locally rather than having to travel all the way to Goa in search of one. It was never articulated in public, but mixed marriages were not looked upon kindly. These clubs also provided, on a regular basis, social events such as dances, bingos (usually referred to as “housey-housey”) and sports such as billiards, and table tennis. The bar was the watering hole for the young teenagers who felt that a beer or two (and sometimes a lot more) never killed anyone and so the bar became the focal point of many young sports participants and enthusiasts who met after a game of hockey or soccer to share their collective experiences. Some these young adults played “flush” (a variant of poker) at very low stakes.

When the Goans got to Zanzibar at the turn of the 18th Century in search of better opportunities, the need for a Goan Club became very urgent. At that time, the various groups ethnic, religious or cultural banded together because they felt that they had much to preserve from the Mother country and there was always safety in numbers. In essence, it became a multicultural society very much like Canada is today. The British (the Colonial Masters) did not seem to mind this just as long as these groups did not pose a danger to their stake in the colony.

Initially, the band that played at the Goan Club was made up of old veterans from the mother country. One played the drums, another played the violin, yet another played the piano and then there was a sax player. In the context of the times when the Waltz, Quick Step, Slow Foxtrot, Tango, Samba and the Viennese Waltz was king, this band churned out all the appropriate sounds and tempo for couples to show off the latest steps. Then came Artie Shaw and his band of renown and conventional sounds were challenged. One fine day a Goan artist from Daressalaam (who played Artie Shaw’s famous tunes on his clarinet) introduced the Zanzibaris to those melodious sounds, and music forever began to change.

Dancing steps became more vigorous with the entry of Elvis Presley on the music scene much to the discontent of the older folk who viewed jive and jitterbug as crude and a curse visited upon their children. It was only after President Kennedy led the way, that these dance expressions found some respectability and subsequent acceptability.

But dances were not the only activities that were planned by the Goans. There was an active field hockey team (A and B teams) representing the Goans and also an active cricket team. All these teams participated in a variety of leagues which were open to serious competition by the other Club enthusiasts.

When Christmas rolled along, we would have Santa dress in his usual red garb and come and meet the excited children at the Club in a hand pulled rickshaw. When the children had their fun and received their toys, there was a Christmas dance held late in the evening for adults. The bar was well attended and there were quite a few inebriated individuals who in spite of their unsteadiness late into the night still got home safely because most people walked home. Perhaps only a handful of members owned cars. Many participants at these dances promptly left for home at mid-night since it was almost cultural that fights ensued shortly thereafter due to the drunkenness of some individuals.

In the early sixties Sports visits were encouraged between the Daressalaam Goan Institute and the Zanzibar Goan Institute. These were times when there was much excitement in Zanzibar and Daressalaam. It was also a special occasion for all the young boys and girls to meet and develop relationships which parents hoped would eventually end in matrimony. Zanzibar was known by the rest of East Africa (Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda) as the one place where teams could look forward to being given a great welcome and a wonderful time. It was also known for its pretty girls.

Most Goan parents in Zanzibar (and I expect elsewhere) were deeply entrenched in the belief in caste. This surfaced particularly when a marriage prospect was to be considered. Somehow, some parents believed that if you married “down” you were marrying someone with some genetic or intellectual disability. Caste also played a pivotal role when it came to membership in the Goan Club. The victims generally denied membership were the Goan cooks, shoe-makers and tailors. As a result the cooks, tailors and shoe makers formed their own association. This form of discrimination will forever be a black mark on the Goan community who, by their very silence, were a party to this degrading and unchristian practice.

They say that it takes a village to raise a child. This is very true of growing up in Zanzibar. Parents kept a religious eye on all the children and this must have assured their safety while they grew up. The great thing about growing up in Zanzibar is that you could go to a friend’s house at

any time of the day without phoning ahead, that is, if you had a phone. You were always welcomed and you were assured that you would be treated with generosity and love by the parents. There was also a great deal of sharing. I recall that our Parsee friends Saros and Goderich Engineer had parents (Parsees) who would order Laurel and Hardy Comics from the UK. Saros and Goderich were considered by their friends to be very fortunate to have wealthy parents who could afford all kinds of toys particularly during the war years. However, Saros and Goderich were very generous and shared whatever they had very willingly. I remember being a regular visitor to their house and enjoyed the “Beano” and “Dandy” comics that appeared at regular intervals. “Captain Marvel” and “Captain Marvel Jr” comics were in short supply but somehow Saros and Goderich always had them.

The Goan Institute surely fulfilled its purpose at least in Zanzibar. To me it became the meeting place of all my friends. We could have healthy fun and grow into mature adults. Above all, the Club provided parents with security that their children were safe, and this took the potential for worry out of parenting.

There were other groups such as the Parsees, Comorians, Chinese and Iranians. All these groups were integrated into Zanzibar society and played an important role in the development of Zanzibar.

The final group were the British Colonials. They were the privileged ones. They had their own exclusive English Club and Golf Club. They generally went about their business without attracting much attention from the public. From time to time, bits of gossip trickled to the community about the misconduct of the Britishers at their Club particularly after they had much to drink. They made excellent rulers but their private lives were generally a shambles. The British did not mix with the “locals” on a social level. Those who made any attempts to do so were ostracised by their own and were often forced to leave the island or were transferred to another less hospitable colony as a penalty.

Our teenage years in Zanzibar were also quite interesting. In spite of all the teenage urges that occupy ones universe of desires at that age, we were still able to exercise a great deal of restraint particularly with the opposite sex. It would be pointless to compare our teenage years with how we see teenagers in North America conduct themselves and the freedoms that they are allowed. Ours was one which was based on sometimes imposed respect for the girls we knew. Sexual contact was taboo. Girls getting pregnant outside marriage were considered “wayward” and they were ostracised by the Goan community. Somehow, even the family of the pregnant girl got ostracised with the shame of it all. As a result, girls were very careful about their virginity, and boys were too scared to be saddled with an unwanted pregnancy particularly because it meant a shotgun marriage if pregnancy did occur. Furthermore, most young boys and girls were looking forward to furthering their education, a theme that was drummed in by the parents since

kindergarten. An unwanted pregnancy would bring a swift end to their ambitions. Fear of venereal diseases also had a very moderating influence on sexual conduct. A.I.D.S. was not known then, but there were other sexually transmitted diseases that were considered as life threatening as H.I.V. (A.I.D.S.)

Growing up in Zanzibar was constantly monitored by parents and friends alike. Neighbours were not reluctant to correct you if they found you doing the wrong thing. Neighbours were respected and so were friends of the family. There was always an awareness that if we did not listen to our elders, we would have to reckon with our parents and this meant serious corporal punishment befitting the offence. There was a deep seated belief in the adage "Spare the rod and spoil the child." Children were to be seen and not heard particularly in the presence of their parents and elders. I really do not believe that it was a good life skill. But I am sure that this made the lives of our parents a lot more bearable than it is for parents today.

St. Joseph's Convent School in Zanzibar has got to be the pulse of our lives as we grew up We were given the discipline that would stand us in good stead, not only in school, but also in later life. My experiences in this School are what movies are made of and on reflection often leave a smile on my face.

Many parents who were forced to leave Zanzibar because of the convulsions of the political system would give their right arm to have brought up their children in Zanzibar. Their children would have had a full childhood free from the stresses of life as it is known in the West today. In the West children are forced to become latch-key kids because economics in the West demands two wages to make ends meet. Children are often denied their childhood that they rightfully deserve and this will forever influence their attitudes and relationship in the future.

Many Zanzibaris tell me that the Zanzibar of the twenty-first century has changed dramatically. The old values have been laid to rest in preference for the values of the West. While this was inevitable, I know I shall always cherish the Zanzibar that I once knew and still love unreservedly.

Sent from my iPhone