



I WAS BORN ON MARCH 4, 1932, in the small town of Wete, in Pemba. Pemba and Unguja islands are together known as Zanzibar. Because the islands are so near the African mainland, there is no doubt that Africans were the earliest settlers in Zanzibar. They lived in small villages as farmers and fishermen. They were mainly Muslims; they called themselves Shirazi and claimed at least partial descent from settlers who came from Persia. They call themselves Shirazi also to differentiate themselves from Africans who came to the islands in the last few generations as either slaves or migrant workers. The Shirazi regard themselves, proudly, as having never been enslaved.

The people of Zanzibar have always been known for their seamanship. Every year dhows from India, Persia, and Arabia followed the winds to come to and go from Zanzibar. For centuries, these travelers came to stay in the islands for almost six months, from December until June, when the monsoon winds would change.

In Oman in the nineteenth century, there was constant feuding, so Sultan Seyyid Said [1806–56] moved his court to Zanzibar Town. The sultans were quite powerful in the nineteenth century, and many Africans came to the islands to live, either as free men and women or as slaves. Most of the influx came from close by on the mainland, but we had slaves come from as far as the Congo because the influence of the sultans went right up to the lakes. There was once a saying, “When one plays the pipes in Zanzibar, they dance on the lakes.”

Seyyid Said was responsible for bringing the clove tree to Zanzibar. We were lucky the soil here was so good for cloves. Even today our cloves are the best in the world. Seyyid Said gave land to different Arab clans; my clan, the Ismail clan, was given land near Wete in Pemba. I do not think anyone was living there already; it was still bush, and if a man cleared the bush and planted clove trees, then according to our legal

traditions, after five years the land was considered his. That was how my ancestors came over in the 1800s.

The first sultan who really built Zanzibar was Barghash [1870–88] because, for a time, he was exiled from Zanzibar to India, where he was exposed [to other cultures]. He built almost all the palaces here in Zanzibar, like the Beit al-Ajaib, which had the first elevator in East Africa. He was also the first in East Africa to introduce electricity and the railroad, and he gave Zanzibar Town a piped supply of clean water. My great grandfather was one of his principal advisors. In those days, Zanzibar Town was the principal town of East Africa.

It was during the period of Barghash's rule that, due to British pressure, the slave trade was abolished—not slavery itself, because we still had that in one form or another until it was abolished during the colonial period. Did slavery leave a lasting legacy in our society? No, I do not think so; it ended when it ended. I have even known some ex-slaves who still worked in their former master's household, instead of leaving as they were permitted. My uncle inherited an ex-slave from the household of my grandfather. By the time I was born, all the family slaves were gone, apart from this one. He was employed to do errands, to slaughter a goat, to chop firewood, or to bring water. He had a room in the house, ate the same food as the rest of us, and was paid. He stayed with my uncle until the end of his life, saying he would not leave the house until either he or my uncle died, whichever came first.

Zanzibar was a very tolerant society; before politics came to the islands in the 1950s, we lived like brothers without much ethnic tension. The society was also tolerant when it came to religion. Islam was predominant, but we did not discriminate against Hindus, Parsees, Buddhists, or Christians. That is the reason I can say even now that we are not fanatics or zealots; we are not ready to fight a jihad and to go to heaven.

Zanzibar was a feudal society up to the early twentieth century, and then boof! A lot of Arabs lost their property to Indians because the Indians were the merchant class, created by the British, who gave the Indians credit. The Arabs came to the Indians and bought things on credit until the harvest season came; sometimes the harvests failed and their property was confiscated. The majority of Arabs were, in fact, rather poor. Very few were rich. Many from Yemen worked as water carriers, called *maarass* in Swahili. They would collect water at a communal tap and carry it to people's homes, most of which lacked running water in those days.

In Pemba, there was more land for Africans to own. There was also a lot of intermarriage between Africans and Arabs, so many people in

Pemba considered themselves arabized. Pemba also had fewer migrant workers come from the African mainland; those who came on labor contracts during the clove harvest season left when the picking was done. Pemba was more homogeneous than Unguja, and more traditional. Pemba got electricity for the first time only in 1960.

Migrants from the mainland mostly went to Unguja, but the fertile land was concentrated in the west and difficult for them to acquire, forcing them to work as laborers and squatters. The Arab landlords lived in town and sometimes sent their children or their cronies to supervise the harvest. They wanted their lands weeded, though, and would allow Africans to live on their plantations and cultivate cassava and bananas and thereby keep the bush cleared. The squatters kept what they produced in their gardens. They did not pay rent but periodically sent gifts to the landowner, like some bananas or breadfruit. That was the system, and it was bound to break down. It lasted until the revolution in 1964.

As far as my own ancestry is concerned, I was not asked into which family or womb I wanted to be born; nor was I consulted about my race. My maternal side originally came from Yemen, and my paternal side from Oman. Both sides of my family, however, were mixed. My great grandmother on my father's side was a Zaramo from Tanganyika, and my grandmother from my maternal side was from the Nandi tribe in Kenya. Since the slave trade, the society here in Zanzibar has been very mixed. Even our sultans were very dark; very few were of pure Arab stock. My family, I can say, was African Arab. We lost the Arabic language and spoke Swahili as our mother tongue.

I was brought up partially by my maternal grandmother, who was very dark. Because of that background, color or race did not influence me at all; I was brought up by my grandmother who was an African, so how could I look down on Africans? I was colorblind and had no problems with Africans. My own people insulted me, but Africans did not, and I lived with Africans on an equal basis. To this day, race means nothing to me, only how you live with your fellow beings.

My maternal grandmother was named Bibi Ruzuna Binti Tamim, and she was once married to Sultan Ali bin Hamoud [1904–11]. He was the first sultan to have been educated outside of Zanzibar, at Harrow in the U.K. My grandmother lived in the palace with him and gave him three children. Then in 1911, the sultan traveled to Europe to attend King George V's coronation in London. When he arrived in Paris, he received a letter from a friend who advised him to abdicate because the

British were going to force him out. If he abdicated, he would get a nice pension, so he did and stayed in Paris until he died.

After my grandmother left the palace, she met my grandfather, named Ali Muhammed Bakashmar al-Abbassy, who was among the first teachers at Zanzibar's first secular school. Later he became Zanzibar's chief *kadhi*, a Muslim judge who decides issues of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. I was very proud of my grandfather. I would greet him, and he would always give me a penny. But he was very strict and very clean; sometimes when I wanted to shake his hand or to kiss it, he would pull his hand away.

On my father's side, my grandfather was named Issa Salim Ali bin Nassor el-Ismaily; he was a respected landowner in Pemba. I never knew him since he died before I was born. I knew only my grandmother who helped raise me. Whenever I went to Pemba, I spent more time with her than with my father. I was very fond of her, and because I was her only grandson, she was very fond of and favored me. I went to her farm and ate fruit all day and talked to her and climbed the mango, tangerine, and orange trees. She would do a little weeding in her cassava garden and chase the monkeys that would come to uproot the cassava with their tails.

Although my father was from a family of landowners, he could not read or write. While he waited for his inheritance, he learned how to drive a car and then became a taxi driver in Zanzibar Town. That is how he met my mother. He had a nickname, *Kibeberu*, meaning a he-goat, because he had a beard and used to stammer. Later, a British district commissioner in Pemba wanted a driver, so he hired my father. The government then appointed my father a district overseer, responsible for all the bridges and secondary, unsurfaced roads on the island; he had a labor force under him. He had an office on the ground floor of a government building and earned about fifteen British pounds a month. This was when our people considered it very respectable to work for the colonial government.

Despite his success, my father was a man of the people. He would joke with the people and swear with them and was very popular. The whole island knew him: he mixed with all classes of people, rich and poor, and whenever a poor person asked for help, he gave it willingly. That is the reason that, when he died, people from throughout the island converged at Wete for his funeral.

My father influenced me; I also joke and swear with people, but not in a bad way. I get my jovial nature from my father's family and my strictness from my mother's side. My mother had a very strong charac-

ter, very *mkali*, which influenced me a lot. She always fought for her rights; when she wanted something, she got it. She was named Harbuu, which comes from the word for *war* in Arabic, because she was born during World War I.

My mother did not work, never went to school, and could read only a little from the Qur'an. Her first husband was her cousin; her second, my father. I was the first born and then my sister, Dalila. Later, I looked after my other younger brothers and sisters, but Dalila and I were only a year apart, so we grew up together and were very close.

My parents did not stay married very long. I remember Thabit Kombo's telling me the story that, when my mother was eight or nine months pregnant with my sister, she held my father by the throat with one hand, so that his feet dangled in the air. My father pleaded for Kombo to help him, but Kombo just took me, a baby, out of my mother's other hand, to protect me. My mother then held my father up with both hands, demanding a divorce.

After the divorce, my mother took us children to live with her family in Zanzibar Town. My relatives owned two houses just behind the Ijumaa Mosque in Malindi, a heavily Arab neighborhood close to the waterfront, an area of fishermen, sailors, and dock laborers. Malindi, although not the wealthiest or oldest part of town, was proud of its history. But because my mother had frequent arguments with her family, we sometimes had to move elsewhere. Or sometimes we moved when my mother failed to pay the rent. So, I lived all over the capital, in neighborhoods such as Kajificheni, Vuga, Baghani, Mchangani, Mbuyuni, Kikwajuni, and Miembeni. I lived among Africans, Arabs, and Asians, among Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. I have always said a true Zanzibari should be able to speak four languages: Swahili, Arabic, Hindi, and English.

In the 1930s (and even now), however, Zanzibar Town was divided into two main areas, Stone Town and Ng'ambo. The well-to-do people lived in Stone Town, and the less well-off lived in Ng'ambo. Ng'ambo started as a poor man's land on the other side of the creek from Stone Town. That is what *Ng'ambo* means in Swahili, "the other side." Stone Town had stone buildings three and four stories high, but Ng'ambo mostly had ground-level buildings constructed of mud, cement, and thatch. The more prosperous had roofs made of corrugated iron.

Mostly Arabs and Indians lived in Stone Town; very few Africans lived on that side of the creek; they would come for work in the day and return to Ng'ambo in the evenings. Ng'ambo was more ethnically mixed than Stone Town. There were Arabs and Comorians living near

the creek, but the further you went into the interior, the more Africans you encountered.

I had to keep moving with my mum when she could not pay the rent. I lived in probably seven or eight different places in Stone Town and about five in Ng'ambo. My mother also remarried several times, so I had a number of stepfathers. These were short marriages: as soon as the husband tried to dominate her, she asked for a divorce. My mother married several men from the mainland, in Dar es Salaam, Tanga, and Mombasa, giving birth to four more children.

My mother caned me for little things, and I feared her because she was huge and strong. Once she sent me to the shop three times to get different things for our dinner. After the third time, I said to her, "Why don't you decide what you need first, so I can get everything in one trip?" She got mad and took a piece of firewood from the fire and hit me on the head, and I bled. She tore off my shirt as a bandage, and she cried over the wound. I laughed and said, "You hit me, and now you cry."

As a young boy, I was rather naughty. I would not be bullied, and despite my small size, I was often chosen as a leader. As children, we played ping-pong, cards, and dominoes. We also went swimming, but sometimes my mother would beat me because she thought I was going to drown. At high tide, we would jump off the waterfront at Forodhani or in front of the old English Club. Cinema was also very popular in those days. We'd go to the Majestic Cinema, the Empire Cinema, and the Sultana Cinema. I saw Bogart, Sinatra, Dorothy Lamour, Ava Gardner, and Elizabeth Taylor. I liked Western films more than Indian films because I could not understand what was happening in the Indian pictures.

I spent most of my years attending primary school in the home of my grandmother in Ng'ambo. She was very strict, tidy, and clean; she would sweep outside the house, and anyone who came, she would chase away. She had the cleanest toilet around, which everyone in the neighborhood knew about. Since she once lived in the sultan's palace, I used to walk and play in the palace, but I also played with the local African boys. I had no established roots and no allegiance to one part of Zanzibar Town or any particular racial community. I was proud of myself and of my family, but not of my race. I did not belong to the school of thought that Arabs had achieved great things in Africa. What had they achieved? Nothing, except the accumulation of wealth for some and poverty for others. Whatever progress was achieved in Zanzibar was the product of historical accident.

Once when I was very young, I dreamt my grandmother took me to Pemba and introduced me to old ladies standing in a vast clearing, all

with their earlobes pulled down to their shoulders. This was at Giningi, a place famous in Pemba for where *wachawi* [witches] like to congregate. There, in front of that gathering of *wachawi*, she asked them to protect me from evil for the rest of my life. In the morning, I told her about my dream, and she said “Shhhhhh, don’t tell anyone.” I was very young, an innocent boy less than seven years old, but since then I have been a survivor.

My friendship with [Abdulrahman Muhammed] Babu began at a very early age. Babu, who became the brains of our political struggle here in Zanzibar, was several years older than I and lived just across the alley from our house in Malindi. He would tease me whenever my family served rice because he could see I liked to eat *ukoko* and *matandu*, which was the rice crust that would collect on the earthen pots after boiling. I liked to dip the rice crust in curry, but Babu would joke with me about that because normally people would not eat the *matandu*; they would just leave it for the servants.

I was seven when World War II started, and food was very scarce since most of it was imported, except cassava and bananas. Ships did not run during the war, so bread and other imported foods were rationed. The British made it compulsory for each family with land to plant some sweet potatoes and cassava, and if the family did not, they were arrested. Around five in the evening, we had our meal, which was our last food until the next day. In the mornings, we had just a cup of tea. I never knew how my mother managed to support us; maybe she received money from her boyfriends. I never asked. I think that is why later I became more sympathetic with the working people, because of that experience of hardship.

It was during the war that racial discrimination became very apparent in Zanzibar. According to the colonial rationing system, the Africans did not receive any imported rice or bread, but the Asians and Arabs got rations of rice and wheat flour of equal quantities. I remember because my mum sent me to the shop with the ration card. Because of this system, I think the British were responsible to a great extent for racial prejudice in Zanzibar. If, when the British came, Arabs were already predominant, they continued Arab dominance for their own ends.