

Colonial Zanzibar: Imprisonment 1880 – 1910

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Investigating the attempt to construct a prison in Zanzibar draws together important themes in the history of empire, incarceration and mobility in the Indian Ocean. Zanzibar, which includes Unguja the largest island, also known as Zanzibar Island, Pemba and Tumbatu, was for much of the nineteenth century the major trading centre in East Africa, becoming a British Protectorate in 1890. British interest and investment in the region greatly increased in the 1880s and 1890s as mainland territories of present-day Kenya and Uganda were brought under British control. This essay will chart the debates around the construction of a new prison for Zanzibar in the years after 1890.

Zanzibar in the Nineteenth Century

Before its commercial heyday in the nineteenth century, Zanzibar had been involved for millennia in Indian Ocean trading networks that linked the port cities of the ocean rim from East Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and the Far East. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Portuguese and the Omanis struggled for control over the East African coast. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Omani commercial empire emerged dominant. Seyyid Said bin Sultan al-Busaidi, ruler of the Omani dynasty until his death in 1856, controlled much of the East African coastline as well as the Omani peninsula. This politically and commercially astute Omani leader moved his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar and under his guidance, the islands grew from one of many Indian Ocean trading conduits to the dominant commercial hub. He encouraged the introduction of the clove crop, which flourished in the climate of Zanzibar and Pemba. Cloves, ivory and slaves were commodities in great demand in the nineteenth century and Zanzibar became the East African nexus of this commerce. At this time, the Swahili formed the majority of the population while the Omani Arab, South Asian and European minorities between them held political, financial and commercial control.



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British interest in the region steadily increased throughout the nineteenth century, governed by the necessity to safeguard her trade routes to India and enforce suppression of the slave trade. As Zanzibar's prosperity depended upon slavery, progress was less rapid. It was not until 1873 that Seyyid Said's son Barghash outlawed the trade in slaves. Royal Navy patrols policed the East African coast capturing slave-carrying vessels and the practice of slavery was finally abolished in 1897. Concurrently, a British naval officer, Lt. Lloyd Mathews, was employed by Sultan Barghash to train a European-style army. In 1881 Mathews retired from the Navy to become "Brigadier-General" of Zanzibar. When Zanzibar became a British Protectorate in 1890, Mathews was appointed First Minister of the Sultan's Government. A form of "dual government" existed in the period from 1890 to 1913, with two centres of power – the aforementioned Sultan's Government, dominated by the Arab and European communities, and the British Consulate and Agency, in control of foreign policy and responsible to the Foreign Office in London.

Imprisonment in Zanzibar

Throughout the nineteenth century, the prison was housed in the eighteenth century fort located on the seafront in Zanzibar Town which also acted as barracks for soldiers. Prisoners were not only local but also brought from the Sultan's territories on the mainland. Richard Burton, the British traveller, who visited in the 1850s, described the heavy iron chains and collars worn by prisoners but reported that they talked, sang and gambled with pebbles. Sir John Kirk, Agent and Consul General, witnessed a very different scene in 1884. He was horrified by the squalid and inhumane conditions. Immediately, he demanded the release of all the prisoners and urged Sultan Barghash to improve the state of the fort. However, the visit of Consul C.S. Smith in 1891 showed that little had

changed – he too encountered prisoners crammed into small unventilated and fetid spaces, the “hot, heavy, foul air” made him near to vomiting.



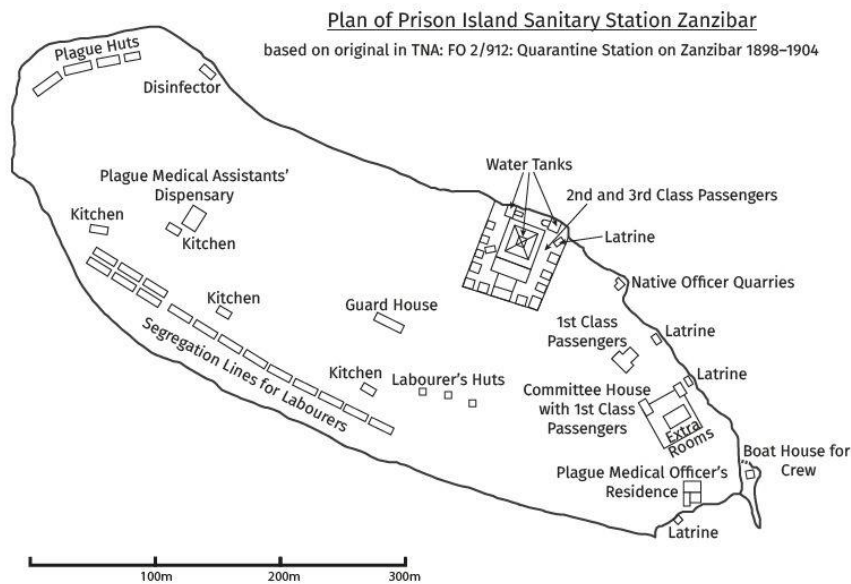
Smith realised that the situation was somewhat different now that Zanzibar was a British Protectorate. Although prisoners were the Sultan’s subjects and tried in the Sultan’s court (British and British Indian subjects were treated separately), he realised that the existence of such inhumane practices in a territory under British protection must be brought to an end. Smith suggested building a new prison on the nearby Changuu Island, some 5 kilometres to the west of Unguja, facing Zanzibar town. This small island had reportedly been used for prisoners convicted of smuggling slaves after the abolition of the slave trade in 1873. After some debate, the proposal was approved by the Foreign Office in 1893. Progress was gradual in the succeeding years, and the jail was completed in the mid-1890s.

This was one of many building projects at the time – road-making was an important project encouraged by the British Consulate and in fact was undertaken in some places by chain-gangs of convicts. The Agent and Consul General in the early 1890s, Rennell Rodd, remarked that in spite of criticisms levelled at the treatment of prisoners chained together to undertake labour in this way, it was likely to be preferable to remaining within the foul conditions of the prison. Many of those imprisoned at the time were captains and crew-members convicted of slave-trading.

Quarantine

The selection of Changuu Island as the new site of the prison and the subsequent construction coincided with extension of British control on the mainland territory into what became the colonies of Kenya and Uganda. A central component of the British ambition to make this region economically productive was the construction of the railway from Mombasa on the coast of the Indian Ocean to Port Florence (present-day Kisumu) on the shores of Lake Victoria. The Uganda Railway, known

colloquially by cynics as “The Lunatic Line,” was a vast and expensive undertaking starting in 1896 which involved laying around 1,000 km of train track across challenging physical landscape, including the Rift Valley. Over 30,000 indentured labourers were brought from India to build the railway.



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This importation of labour, necessary for imperial infrastructure, brought global forces to bear upon a small island off Zanzibar. In 1891, Changuu Island had been designated as the stopping point for boats requiring a quarantine station amidst a fear of cholera from Arabia. After the prison had been completed, fears of epidemics from India were heightened with the influx of labourers from the subcontinent. The Sultan’s Government decided to postpone transporting prisoners to the island until these outbreaks had lulled. In the meantime, the island became popular with local Europeans as a place for recuperation from disease, benefitting from the clean air and breeze in contrast to what they experienced in Zanzibar town. Bungalows on the island, intended for various prison staff, acted as comfortable temporary lodgings.

In 1899, the British government presented a proposal to the Sultan’s Government to assign what was by then known as Prison Island as the quarantine station for the whole of the East African region. It was deemed only practical that a single station become the stopping-point for ships at risk of bringing infectious disease to the African continent. First Minister Mathews argued forcefully against this proposal, not wishing Zanzibar to be at greater risk of epidemics. He himself had championed the prison project and also approved of the use of the site for recuperation for town residents. His resistance was futile and in 1899, Prison Island became the main East African quarantine station. A medical centre was established there and the various buildings intended for the prison were allocated to deal with first, second and third class passengers, with Indian labourers being provided with huts along the shoreline. The island maintained this function even after the completion of the Uganda railway in 1901.

Risks of disease continued in the first half of the twentieth century from ships crossing the Indian Ocean and the coastal territories and towns attempted to improve public health and sanitary measures. Not all could be halted – there was a serious plague outbreak in Zanzibar in 1905 that began in India. “Prison Island” was used regularly for quarantine until 1910. This use was retained for decades after, although the numbers of ships dropped considerably and the medical staff only

relocated there temporarily. It continued, however, to be used as an island resort increasingly popular with town dwellers seeking a convenient picnic spot and site for brief restorative trips away from the town. The buildings were never used as a prison, an alternative site eventually located on Unguja in Kilimani in the early 1920s, around 3 km from the town centre.

Conclusion

The case of Prison Island alerts us to the impact of the global movement of people in the period of high imperialism upon local circumstances. The 1890s was a period of growing official control by the British over Zanzibar and its people, legal systems and infrastructure. Local concerns about the welfare of prisoners in the inhumane conditions in the prison were superseded by wider imperial priorities. As one set of people was moved from India to East Africa, potentially carrying lethal diseases, another group languished in the Zanzibar fort.

Further Reading

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Primary Sources for Further Study

Zanzibar National Archives

The National Archives (www.tna.gov.uk)