

Planning and Replanning Ng'ambo – Zanzibar

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The planning of Zanzibar was taken into hands by the British colonial administration in order to develop a neatly segregated modern city. In this process, the historic eastern part of the city, Ng'ambo, was stigmatized as the informal, native quarter, as opposed to the elite part of the city, 'Stone Town'. Notwithstanding the multiple attempts to replace Ng'ambo with a planned modernist quarter, Ng'ambo resisted and developed its own modernity.

Keywords: Informal modernity, urban planning, colonial stigmatization

De planning van Zanzibar werd in handen genomen door het Britse koloniale bestuur om een keurig gescheiden moderne stad te ontwikkelen. In dit proces, werd het historische oostelijke deel van de stad, Ng'ambo of 'de Andere Kant', gebrandmerkt als het informele, inheemse kwartier, in tegenstelling tot 'Stone Town', het elite deel van de stad. Niettegenstaande de vele pogingen om Ng'ambo vervangen door een geplande modernistische wijk, verzette Ng'ambo zich en ontwikkelde haar eigen moderniteit.

Sleutelwoorden: Informele moderniteit, stedenbouw, koloniale stigmatisering



Figure 1

Ng'ambo residents moving out of Michenzani

Source: Zanzibar National Archives

William Cunningham Bissell, in his book *Urban Design, Chaos, and Colonial Power in Zanzibar*, argues that policymaking and planning of urban Zanzibar has been, right from the establishment of the British Protectorate in 1891, a chaotic story. A chaos that served the conscious scheming of the colonial administration well, and which was in itself based on naive ideas. This political heritage has cast its shadows far into the future. Bissell states that

“(…) in tracing the tale of the incessant making and remaking the modern in Zanzibar City, I show how colonial disorder and dysfunction has laid the foundation for contemporary conditions typically attributed to postcolonial African regimes” (2011: 3),

and he continues that

“(…) through either historical amnesia or active forgetting, contemporary problems in the city have been wrongly interpreted as the products of postcolonial mismanagement and indigenous incompetence when in fact the roots of urban disarray stretch far back into the bureaucratic chaos unleashed by colonial designs.” (2011: 4)

As an example, Bissell mentions the countless decrees and planning initiatives launched by the colonial government, which proved to be ad hoc, sometimes contradictory and often unrealistic in terms of execution or management due to the chronic shortage of professional personnel and funds.

In Zanzibar, true chaos was created by the refusal of the colonial administration to create a Municipality, out of fear of opposition from the Zanzibari elite and citizens. Any urban planning initiative on Zanzibar thus had to pass the various ministries and departments, such as Ministries of Health and Lands, the Public Works Department, and the Police. For the a citizen of Ng’ambo – a sector of Zanzibar town - obtaining a building permit for a small outdoor kitchen to his residence was to walk the long and circuitous way through all these institutions.

Bissell states that the colonial policies and planning traditions have been inherited by the post-colonial administration, and that up to the present, due to this heritage, both government and citizens are struggling to get things straight. Strange enough though,

“(…) in a cruel irony, many Zanzibaris now look back to the British and their alleged designs, when it was precisely colonialism that laid the uncertain and disorderly foundations of the present, instead of focusing on the available means at hand or relying on local resourcefulness and indigenous creativity.” (2011: 333)

Bissell refers to schemes that are based on modern dreams of total design, reflecting a technocratic vision of complete order and control, whereas he pleads for the Zanzibari to embrace and draw

“upon those elements that actually make the city worth living: the improvisational, the unknown, the capacity to survive. It is well past time for Zanzibaris and others to dismantle the colonial legacy of incompetence that has hindered them from realizing their own indigenous and everyday powers of urban design.” (2011: 334)

Bissell does consciously exaggerate his argument, in order to make his point clear. Of course, he does know, as we do, that there is something like modern infrastructure that, in whatever way we want to build our city, needs to be accommodated. Just think of electrification, sanitation and fire safety, to name a few.

Aspirations to modernity

Key to the drive of the colonial and post-colonial society to plan and re-plan Zanzibar is, according to Bissell, the lure of ‘modernity’. Modernity is a complex notion that deserves to be researched in itself. It is a notion that carries multiple and differing meanings for various individuals and groups.

Bissell defines modernity in his study as “(...) an European invented term to distinct [sic] Europe from the backward rest of the world. Urbanity is quite central to that notion” (2011: 24), and so is the shift from the rural to the urban, bringing rationality and innovation that is modernity.

Yet, there is a contradiction within this definition, because the shift from the rural to the urban already took place in Africa well before European ingress. Kilwa, as an example of Swahili urban culture, was a thriving merchant city in the 12th century. Zanzibar itself was well developed before the modern European powers set foot on the island by the middle of the 19th century. Hence, in this sense, modernity cannot be stated as a sole European invention. But the use of the notion for the conscious positioning of European thought on the African continent by the end of the 19th century certainly cuts wood. And, as Bissell continues,

“Modernity still is the haunting image of the sophisticated western technopolis for the Africans, who do not realize that they have invented and implemented their own modernity over time, creating the African modern city.” (2011: 25)

This is an observation to be heeded by contemporary planners and decision makers active in the field of African urban development. The African city of Zanzibar is a modern city, but it is conceived and built in a different way than the European one, in a way that seems to elude the policies, master plans, grand designs, guidelines, conventions, by-laws, decrees, and all the other instruments introduced by the ‘western world’. Popularly, this non-planned situation is referred to as informal, organic, if not blandly stigmatized as ‘slum’. Yet, the notion of the ‘informal city’ is somehow strange, because all cities’ genesis and growth are based on formal patterns. If, in Zanzibar, historic Ng’ambo is qualified as informal, organic and a slum, so is Stone Town, as we will see.

There is no doubt about the fact that modernity is still luring the citizens of Zanzibar. This desire surfaces clearly from recent surveys on Ng’ambo, such as from the interviews carried out by Shapira Hellerman Associates (2013: 419) for the new Structure Plan of Zanzibar.

Residents of Vikokotoni and Michenzani were asked about their ideas for the future of Ng’ambo. Their answer was that a new highrise city, not dissimilar to the ‘German Blocks’, should replace the existing. With the ‘German Blocks’ are meant the monumental apartment blocks erected by late President Karume at Michenzani. For ‘highrise’, no doubt, Dubai is the reference. This modern city is seen as the panacea for all the ills of the existing city, but most importantly, it is understood as the idea of the modern city itself.

Ng’ambo, apart from Karume’s planned intervention of the 1960s and 70s, has however developed its own modernity, which seems to be ignored by everyone, the residents included. As we speak, new multi-story buildings with ‘modern’ apartments are popping up all over Ng’ambo. Notwithstanding all attempts to regularization, Ng’ambo has developed itself in a ‘home grown’ fashion into what it is, and it will probably continue to do so for the decades to come (Figure 2).



Figure 2
Left: Ng'ambo in the late 19th century
Source: Zanzibar National Archives
Right: In 2013
Photo: Berend van der Lans, African Architecture Matters

Ng'ambo is not a slum

Ng'ambo, meaning literally 'the other side', commenced as a suburb of Zanzibar on the other side of the tidal creek that divided the peninsula - on which the city was founded - from the main island. This expansion commenced not later than the 1840's, probably much earlier. By 1846, on Guillain's map, the Ng'ambo suburb is already substantial (Figure 3). Ng'ambo grew fast, and by the end of the 19th century, its size exceeded that of Stone Town on the peninsula.



Figure 3
Map of Zanzibar by Capitan Guillain, 1846
Source: African Architecture Matters

Until the installation of the British Protectorate in 1891, there was no difference between the two parts of the city in terms of population presence and construction. Arabs, Swahili, Indians, Persians, Comorans, Goans, Malgache, a true cosmopolitan population lived on both side of the creek, in wattle-and-daub Swahili houses, in stone type Omani riads and in Indian duka's (Figure 4). The urban tissue on both sides of the Creek was also basically the same. It was the British administration that changed this cosmopolis by re-organizing the town into a segregated city. The peninsular part on the western side of the Creek became Stone Town – in itself subdivided in European, Arab and Indian quarters – and Ng'ambo on the mainland of Zanzibar became the native sector. Hence, in its origin, there is not such a thing as a traditional divide between Stone Town and Ng'ambo. The Creek was nothing else than a natural barrier, which, conveniently, was turned into a greenbelt, a 'cordon sanitaire' between the two parts of the city. The whole notion of 'Stone Town' is a remarkable one, as a 'stone town' cannot exist without a 'mud town'. But there was no such thing as a 'mud town'. In both parts of the city there were stone houses and mud houses next to each other.¹



Figure 4
Late 19th century Mselem House next to traditional Swahili houses
and new apartment building
Photo: Berend van der Lans, African Architecture Matters

In this way a typical colonial African city, based on racial segregation, was conceived. Regulations were drafted for the city, for the houses and the huts, for one side and for the other. This theoretical split has survived up to today, dividing the city into a Stone Town and the Other Side, both with their own set of rules and plans. One has become World Heritage, the other a slum to be upgraded.

But what is a slum? UN Habitat (2007: 23) defines a slum as an urban area that lacks one or more of the following:

1. Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions;
2. Sufficient living space which means not more than three people sharing the same room;
3. Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price;

4. Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable number of people;
5. Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions.

According to this definition, many African cities are predominantly slums (Davis 2010: 69). The majority of the houses in Zanzibar Stone Town and Ng'ambo both qualify as slums. What is the sense of this definition?

Upgrading, or modernizing, Ng'ambo has been on the agenda since Lanchester's Zanzibar master plan of 1923. And today, 90 years later, multiple plans and strategies to formalize, or better, to rebuild Ng'ambo according to formal planning systems and rules, have passed over the table. Aerial surveys were undertaken in the late 1920s, the detailed Ng'ambo Folder was created, in the 1940s a Civic Centre was constructed in order to radiate modern thought, the quarter of Holmwood was built on an English Garden City model, a second masterplan was produced in the late 1950s, but little really changed Ng'ambo's situation and development until the Revolution of 1964. Planning, monitoring capacity and funds were never sufficient to replan and rebuild Ng'ambo. Yet, the intention to rebuilt Ng'ambo into a clean and modern city never left the planning table. Ng'ambo - notwithstanding the fact that visitors and professional surveyors often described Ng'ambo as a pleasant and neat part of town - was a slum and needed to be rebuilt (Folkers 2010: 69).

Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo

In order to show the impact of planning, survey and replanning on Ng'ambo, a small area, consisting of the two neighbourhoods of Kisimamajongoo² and Kisiwandui³, has been the subject of a study of their detail (Figures 5,6 and 7).

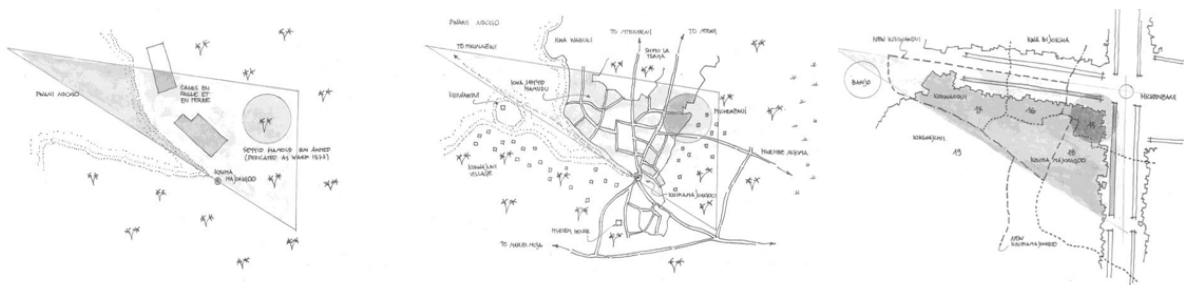


Figure 5
Left: The Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area in Ng'ambo in the 1870s
Drawn by author, 2014
Middle: The Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area in Ng'ambo in the early 1900s
Drawn by author, 2014
Right: The Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area in Ng'ambo in 2014
Drawn by author, 2014

Lanchester, a pupil of the famous urban designer Patrick Geddes, remodelled Zanzibar town with a number of larger and smaller interventions in his 1923 master plan (Figure 6). The larger interventions encompassed the extension of the port through land reclamation, a monumental redesign for Stone Town's seafront and the canalization of the Creek. For Ng'ambo, he proposed

some smaller interventions, as he did not see a possibility to redesign the area without a proper survey.



Figure 6
The 1923 masterplan by Lanchester (source: African Architecture Matters)

For the Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area though, Lanchester’s proposals carried some important consequences. The rearrangement of the Creek into a tidal canal and basin, baptized ‘the Banjo’, caused a major change to the access of Ng’ambo through the Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area. The low-tide track crossing the Creek was replaced by a bridge, daraja mpyia, the new bridge, so named to make the distinction with the old, 19th century bridge. This new bridge was located at the inlet of the canal into the tidal basin. At the Ng’ambo side of the bridge, a major junction was conceived with roads leading into five directions. This junction did however not come about until Karume’s interventions of the 1960s. Lanchester proposed to realign and widen a number of roads, and the road leading from the Daraja Mpya to Kisimamajongoo crossing was to become one of the most important roads through Ng’ambo.

On the landfill south of the Banjo, the plan proposed a recreation ground, which indeed would become a cricket pitch and later the Mnazi Moja football grounds. North of the Banjo, new Indian quarters were proposed on the landfill. This did not happen, instead this area was left as public space.

For Kikwajuni, south of the Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area, a new orthogonal neighbourhood was sketched, and at Michenzani, most remarkable of all the interventions proposed for Ng'ambo, Lanchester sketched in a neatly arranged Goanese Vilage.

Lanchester's instructions on surveying Ng'ambo were followed. Aerial photographs were taken in 1927, traced and compiled into the so-called Ng'ambo Folder,⁴ but only to be completed in 1948, 25 years after Lanchester drafted his master plan. The Ng'ambo Folder does not contain any of the new neighbourhoods that Lanchester had proposed. As a matter of fact, Ng'ambo had in the mean time expanded to well beyond the city limits of 1923 and informal settlements had occupied the land for which Lanchester had made his designs.

The only interventions affecting the Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area that were proposed in the Ng'ambo Folder are the realignments and widening of some roads. This rearrangement of the roads was followed until the end of the colonial period, and the policy was to implement this through building regulations. If a house impeding the projected road alignment was found in a derelict state by the building inspector, the owner was summoned to demolish the house and to rebuild according to the projected alignment as specified in the Ng'ambo Folder.

The second masterplan for Zanzibar, the Kendall-Mill master plan of 1958, focused on curbing the expansion of Zanzibar City and rearrange certain areas into neatly segregated zones. For the Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area there were no specific interventions proposed according to this master plan. As with Henry Lanchester, Henry Kendall did not want to make proposals for Ng'ambo without further surveying. And, indeed, Ng'ambo was again the subject of a survey during the last years of colonial rule.⁵

The only intervention of any importance carried out in the late colonial period affecting the Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area, was the conversion of the Banjo into a small park, designed by Kendall's assistant Geoffrey Mill (Figure 7).

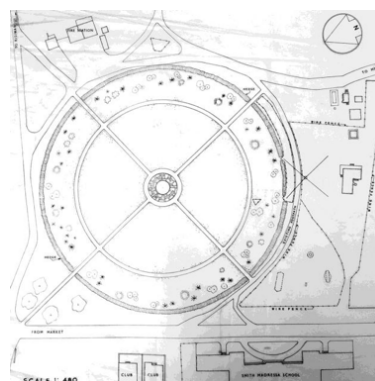


Figure 6
The Banjo Park designed by Geoffrey Mill in 1959
Source: Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Zanzibar

The first president of independent Zanzibar, Sheikh Abeid Amani Karume, had some completely different ideas than those of the colonial planners. As early as 1964, the year of the Revolution overthrowing the Sultan, he made it clear that he wished to erase the divided city, by clearing up Stone Town and have Ng'ambo rebuilt as Zanzibar New Town. On advice from various parties, he left Stone Town for later and concentrated on Ng'ambo where, with the help of the GDR town planner Hubert Scholz, Zanzibar New Town was designed (Figure 7).

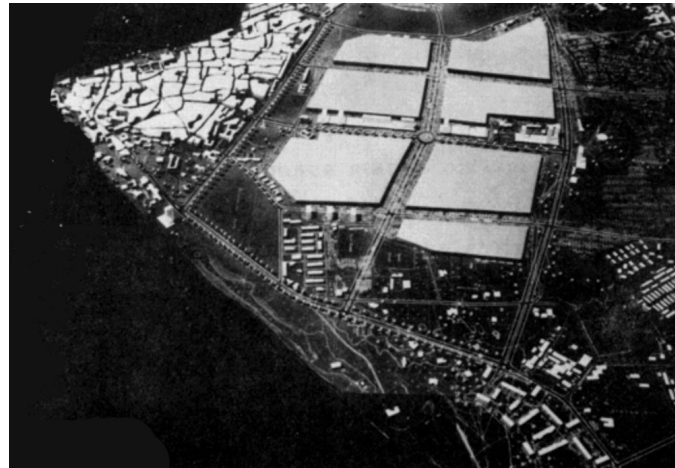


Figure 7
Model of Zanzibar New Town to the 1968 Masterplan by Hubert Scholz
Source: African Architecture Matters

Ng'ambo was to be replaced by a town of new multistory blocks placed in a green environment, around an axis connecting Stone Town to the new city centre, 'the Crown' of the new city of Zanzibar (Scholz 1968: 23). This east-west axis, intersected by a perpendicular axis connecting the northern and southern coastal roads was elaborated to a grandiose scale, with double carriageways of some fifty meters wide and a great roundabout with a monumental fountain. The connection to Stone Town was made at the former location of Darajani Mpyia, where the ruling party, the ASP, had just erected their new headquarters (Figure 8).



Figure 8
The ASP Headquarters and Michenzani Trains in the early 1970s
Source: Capital Art Studio, Zanzibar

As a prelude to the execution of the centre of Karume's New Town, the model neighbourhoods of Kikwajuni and Kilimani were erected on remaining green field locations in and around Ng'ambo. These housing complexes were erected in order to shift those citizens of Ng'ambo who would have to move from their old houses that were due for demolition to make room for the grand Zanzibar New Town project.

However, the design for the buildings along the main axes was seriously modified by Karume after the departure of Scholz and his East German comrades. Instead of the loosely arranged blocks of limited height that Scholz had sketched for the Kisimamajongoo and Kisiwandui area (Figure 9), Karume designed a line up of twelve 300m long apartments blocks of up to 8 floors. These were to become the 'Michenzani Trains', or 'German Blocks', as they would become popularly know (Figures 1, 8 and 10).

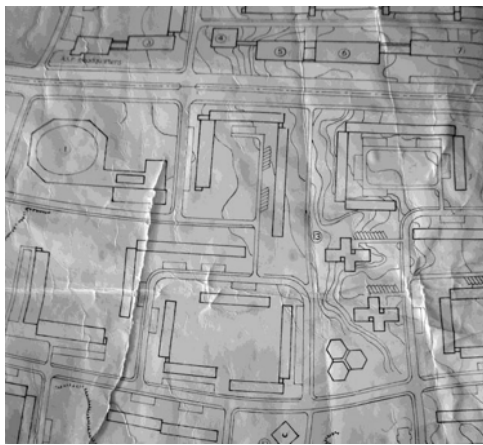


Figure 9
Redevelopment proposal for the
Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area by Scholz cs., ca 1969
Source: Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Zanzibar



Figure 10
Michenzani Trains setting out drawing ca 1970
Source: Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Zanzibar

For other neighbourhoods of Ng'ambo, other teams in the mean time worked on proposals for the rebuilding. One of these proposals, for Miembeni, was prepared by a team from Lund University in Sweden, headed by Sten-Åke Nilsson in 1969. Interestingly, Nilsson (1969: 34), in his conclusion to the proposed development schemes, suggests that a gradual rebuilding, based on the existing tissue, be considered as possible alternative.

The Michenzani project was continued after Karume's premature death in 1972, with the Blocks 11 and 12 only completed as late as 2008. But Michenzani was also to be the swansong of Karume's New Town. The rebuilding of Ng'ambo, though commenced energetically, came to standstill due to the high costs of the investment and the small return in rent, as most of the citizen of Zanzibar were not able to afford this type of housing.

In 1982, the fourth master plan for Zanzibar was drafted, this time by a Chinese team headed by Qian Kequan. The plan started from a rearrangement of the administrative division of Zanzibar into neighbourhood units. The south-eastern quadrant of Michenzani New Town, in which the Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area is located, became neighbourhood unit 2.

This Chinese masterplan departed from the clean slate rebuilding proposals for Ng'ambo and instead proposed a partial rebuilding, based on a rationalized existing urban tissue. As an example for this approach, a plan was drawn for Mwembetanga, the area opposite the Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area on the northern side of Michenzani (Figure 11).



Figure 11
Redevelopment proposal for Mwembetanga by Kequan cs., 1982
Source: Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Zanzibar

The plan further elaborated the ideas of the new city centre of Zanzibar, as proposed by Scholz in 1968. The centre was proposed to be divided into two sectors; a commercial sector north of Michenzani junction and an administrative centre at the former Darajani Mpyia location, with monument at the end of the road from Michenzani junction (Figure 15). Opposite the ASP Headquarters, a new government office was proposed, which would mean the sacrifice of the park at the Banjo.



Figure 12
Plan for new Zanzibar City Centre by Kequan cs., 1982
Source: Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Zanzibar

Since recently, ideas that are based on the conservation of the existing Ng'ambo substance and ideas based on a clean slate redevelopment of Ng'ambo, exist side by side. The draft guidelines produced by a team from the University of Pretoria, headed by Karel Bakker in 2012, respect existing tissue and heritage but allow development and densification, subject to design guidelines and codes. At the same time, the Zanzibar Government is inclined to a more drastic approach, as is apparent in a pilot plan drafted by the Department of Urban and Regional Planning in 2013⁶ for a small area within the Kisiwandui-Kisimamajongoo area and that is based on realigning the roads, in this manner creating new city blocks and integrally rebuilding the area.

As can be seen from the above, a pendulum movement in the planning approach to Ng'ambo can be discerned over time, from status quo to complete rebuilding, and back. The plans of Lanchester (1923), the Ng'ambo Folder (1948), Kendall (1958), Nilsson (1969), Qian Kequan (1982) and Bakker & White (2012) start from rationalized conservation, whereas Scholz (1968), Karume (1970) and DoURP (2011) propose a clean slate approach.

In retrospect, the only time that substantial rebuilding effectively took place in Ng'ambo, was by Karume in the late 1960's. It needed a Revolution with an authoritarian and charismatic president to 'crucify' Ng'ambo.⁷ Other initiatives to redevelop Ng'ambo according to a 'formal', or official plan, have failed to materialize thus far.

Yet, over time, almost unnoticed, Ng'ambo densified and modernized. The traditional Swahili houses with their wattle-and-daub walls and makuti roofs have been modernized or replaced by new buildings that were established on the existing footprint and, by and large, respecting the historical urban tissue and cultural components. In the architecture of the new buildings, reference is made to the traditional Zanzibari architecture. Zanzibar doors, barazas, arches, roof parapets and other decorative or spatial elements reappear in combination with tinted glass curtain walls, precast banisters and cement roof tiles, to form a contemporary, hybridized architecture that may not always meet the appreciation of the academically trained architect, but does certainly pay homage to Zanzibar's past.

Possibly, Ng'ambo of today can be regarded as the natural, organic outcome of a new Stone Town, not a 19th century one, but a version of today (Figure 12).



Figure 12
Kisimamajongoo in 2013
Photo: Berend van der Lans, *African Architecture Matters*

Notes

- 1 Abdul Sheriff in his lecture given during the Historic Urban Landscapes Workshop on Zanzibar, February 2014.
- 2 Kisimamajongoo: the Well of the Millipedes.
- 3 Kisiwandui: Chicken Pox Island, named after the islet in the Creek where mariners suspected of carrying chicken pox were kept in quarantine around 1900.
- 4 The Ng'ambo Folder, The National Archives, Kew. TNA (PRO)CO1054-146 MAPS&PLANS AFRICA
- 5 Survey carried out by Abdul Wahab Allawi, government town planner.
- 6 Consulted by author at the Department of Urban and Regional Planning in 2013.
- 7 Abdul Sheriff in interview by author, Zanzibar, November 2013

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