

*Information, Society and Justice, Volume 3 No. 2, July 2010: pp 177-185*  
ISSN 1756-1078

# Debating Africa: BBC's Documentary "Heart & Soul - Return to Zanzibar"

Contributors:  
Katy Hickman<sup>1</sup>,  
Abdul Sheriff<sup>2</sup> &  
Yasmin Alibhai-Brown<sup>3</sup>

---

---

## Editorial Note

This issue of ISJ carried another article in the irregular series "Debating and Documenting Africa", the first one having been published in Vol. 1 No.2 (June 2008). This issue carries a discussion between Katy Hickman, Senior Producer at BBC World Service Religion and Ethics and Prof. Abdul Sheriff, formerly Professor of History at the University of Dar es Salaam and Director of Zanzibar Museums and the author of forthcoming titles, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam* and *The Early Dhow Culture in the Indian Ocean: From the Periplus to the Portuguese*.

The context of this debate is BBC Radio's "Return to Zanzibar" programme in their series, Heart & Soul. Setting the scene is Katy Hickman's contact with Prof. Sheriff in which she enclosed an early outline of the programme. This is followed by Prof. Sheriff's response which raises various key issue of relevance to the study of Africa. This is followed by Katy Hickman's response which explains how the final version was influenced by points raised by Prof. Sheriff. Also included is a later piece by the presenter of the programme, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown. While not part of this discussion, the latter is included to provide the presenter's perspective. All these provide a look behind the scene on debates that take place before programmes are made and bring out the key role that historians, researchers and academicians can, and need to play, in social communications.

ISJ's Editorial Board re-presents this debate to stimulate further discussion.

---

<sup>1</sup> Senior Producer, British Broadcasting Corporation, London

<sup>2</sup> Formerly Professor of History, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

<sup>3</sup> Presenter of BBC Documentary, "Heart and Soul – Return to Zanzibar"

## 1. BBC's initial email

**From:** BBC

**Sent:** 22 April 2009 04:13

**Subject:** BBC World Service

Hello,

I work on a documentary strand called Heart and Soul on the BBC World Service Radio. We are making a programme about the Islamic Slave trade especially in relation to Zanzibar. As part of my research, and before we arrive to record the programme, I would like to speak to an academic who can put the Islamic slave trade into context and who can talk about how it has affected the Zanzibarian psyche in the present day. Can you help? I've included the synopsis of our programme below:

Two hundred and fifty years ago nineteen thousand slaves were recorded as arriving on the tiny island of Zanzibar. This was 50 years after Britain had withdrawn from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. And the slaves were not destined for the Western-owned plantations, but for markets in the Middle East, and for Zanzibar's Arab rulers and land-owners. This was a trade in humans that rivaled the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, but was run for and by Islam's Arab leaders. The Prophet Mohammed may have owned and traded in slaves, but how far did the Koran justify what became a wide-scale plunder of people from countries as far away as the Balkans and East African coast.

Yasmin Alibhai Brown visits the last remaining holding cells beneath the old slave market in Zanzibar, to look at how the Islamic faith both supported slavery, but also alleviated some of the worst abuses. As she travels around the island she asks why there has never been an open recognition of the Arab slave trade and reconciliation with the past. The Christian church may have justified and defended the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, but it also became the main instigator in its demise, and has spent decades apologising for the mistakes of the past, and asking for forgiveness.

In the 1960s ethnic violence flared on Zanzibar and many Arabs were forced to flee and their lands were expropriated by the families of former slaves. Did the memory of slavery have a hand in the violence, and how does the island now view its slave roots. Heart and Soul explores the history and legacy of the Islamic slave trade.

I look forward to hearing from you. Many thanks

BBC

Written on behalf of:

Katy Hickman, Senior Producer, BBC World Service Religion and Ethics

## 2. Prof. Abdul Sherriff's response:

I must say that I was dismayed by your synopsis. I consider myself a serious historian of Zanzibar. So the words I am going to use below do not come easy for me, but they need to be said. Your synopsis, quite frankly, sounds like a British and Christian self-congratulatory apologetics, and at the same time unabashedly part of 'Islam- and Arab-bashing.'

To start with, have you ever asked yourself why you have called slavery in Zanzibar 'Islamic', when you do not call the Atlantic slavery Christian? Because of the people involved in it? Because of the religion used to justify in each case? You are right in not calling it Christian, because it is not the religion that explains why it arose in 17-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, but the mode of production that was coming into being, as Marx put it, 'the rosy dawn of capitalism.'

You have also congratulated yourself by saying that although the Christian church 'may have justified and defended' it, 'it also became the main instigator of its demise.' Nobody would want to belittle the intense humanitarianism of people like Wilberforce and Livingstone, but you do not ask why that humanitarianism welled up or came to fruition only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and not before. There is another historical interpretation about the abolition of slavery, the Eric Williams thesis – abolition of slavery and substitution of free labour and free consumers was more profitable for the capitalist mode of production. Livingstone himself pushed this as 'humanitarianism plus five per cent.'

If both the rise and demise of slavery are due to forces other than the religions, although they may have played both positive and negative roles in them, then your question as to why Islam did not do what Christianity did at that particular time in calling for its abolition needs to be thought again and framed differently. I do not wish to get into this debate which you can follow up, if you wish, in SOAS's William Clarence-Smith's recent book on the subject.<sup>4</sup>

You have also described the East African slave trade as 'Arab.' I am not an Arab, and do not have to apologise for Arabs, but that is irrelevant. They were undoubtedly involved; but so were British Indians who owned more than 6,000 slaves in Zanzibar in the 1860s; the indigenous peoples of Zanzibar who also owned slaves and used them on their plantations and farms; the Africans on the mainland who hunted each other and supplied the market at the coast; the European and American traders who could not legally own slaves but had no hesitation in employing slaves to transport their goods; some European consuls had slave concubines, and treated them worse than the Arabs did; a former British naval officer wanted to start a joint venture with the Sultan of Zanzibar in which he would supply capital and machinery, and the Sultan would supply land and (slave) labour. So why focus so single-mindedly on the Arabs? Let us be honest, and not try to clean up our own dirty backyards by throwing our rubbish across the religious or national fences.

Finally, you try to link the question of slavery with ethnic violence in Zanzibar in the 1960s. You say 'many Arabs were forced to flee', but perhaps it is unpalatable for you to

---

<sup>4</sup> Books by Williams Clarence-Smith include the following: *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*. 2006. London: Hurst & Company.

say that thousands of Arabs were massacred in what we would now have had little hesitation in describing it as ethnic cleansing and genocide. A very small number of big Arab landowners, who were mostly living in Zanzibar town, were killed; but whole families of poor Arab shopkeepers in the countryside, recent immigrants with no stain of slavery on them, were surrounded and massacred, including women and children, not forgetting equally innocent civilian men. That the 'Revolutionaries' may use the old slavery question to camouflage their pogrom should not blind us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We would not dare use the same argument if we were dealing with the holocaust.

Yasmin Alibhai Brown, you say, will visit 'the last remaining cells beneath the old slave market in Zanzibar,' and she will be told that 140 slaves used to be kept in that underground chamber. When she does that, she should ask how long they will have survived in the hot climate of Zanzibar with only the narrow slits in the walls for windows. By the way, the slits look remarkably similar to the Gothic windows of the Church of Christ as a whole. An American researcher has concluded that the underground chamber under St. Monica was built in 1905, eight years after the total abolition of slavery in Zanzibar, by Anglican missionaries, and was probably used by them for a more humanitarian purpose of storing medicines in cooler underground chamber if not heated up body heat of 140 humans. She will also be told that a slave was buried under each of the pillars of the House of Wonders, which was built in the 1880s in full view of the all the Western consuls who did not even notice it; she may even be taken to Mangapwani and shown the underground 'slave chambers' cut through solid rock, but there is another version that an Arab keeper of the spirits (Majini) used it for his profession.

This is absolutely not to deny that slavery existed in Zanzibar, and it was horrible. I myself have fully documented that in fact an even larger number of slaves (23,000) than you state, were passing through Zanzibar by the mid 1860s – although this is still less than half the annual average of the Atlantic slave trade over 200 years, hardly a rival that you imply. The beautiful Anglican Cathedral was built on the site of the last slave market in Zanzibar, on land donated by a Hindu owner, and the Muslim Sultan of Zanzibar donated the clock in its tower. To me (a Muslim) it is a house of God, and part of our national heritage. Yasmin Alibhai Brown would do well to look at the signboard to the Cathedral – I was surprised to see the name of the Cathedral Church of Christ written in small letters, while 'The Last Slave Market' is written in letters twice the size. I cannot but regret that slavery has become a new 'product' to sell to the tourists, still to make money out of the dead bones of slaves.

To conclude on the question of 'Islamic slavery', this is indeed a serious question, and I would have thought especially for your 'Heart and Soul' programme. Islam, and as Bernard Lewis has shown, all the monotheistic religions, found and did not abolish slavery at their birth and long thereafter. Islam found domestic slavery in Arabia, and it tried to ameliorate the condition of slaves. It did not consider them as chattel but as human beings with certain rights and responsibilities. Out of 19 references to slavery in the Qur'an, 10 of them relate to their manumission – strange for a religion that has become almost synonymous with slavery in the Western mind. It is also true that certain Muslims in 9<sup>th</sup> century Basra or 19<sup>th</sup> century Zanzibar developed plantation slavery, and used the excuse of saving the souls of the heathens by hunting for slaves. All of this you are prepared to put under one label, 'Islamic slavery.' I do not think justice can be done to the subject with your synopsis, which does not depart too much from numerous tourist documentaries on the subject.

I am leaving in a few days for two months of retreat to do quiet research of my own, and I would not like to engage in this debate. I am sorry that I could not restrain myself from responding to your synopsis. I cannot reverse the torrent of Islamo- and Arabo-phobia; I can only throw a pebble into it, but that will not build a dam. That is why I do not wish to engage in it fruitlessly.

Some books by Prof. Sheriff are listed at the following sites:

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/Books/s/qid=1250767613/ref=sr\\_pg\\_1?ie=UTF8&rs=266239&bbn=266239&rh=n%3A266239%2Cp\\_27%3AAbdul%20Sheriff%2Cn%3A1025612&page=1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Books/s/qid=1250767613/ref=sr_pg_1?ie=UTF8&rs=266239&bbn=266239&rh=n%3A266239%2Cp_27%3AAbdul%20Sheriff%2Cn%3A1025612&page=1) and at: [http://www.allbookstores.com/author/Abdul\\_Sheriff.html](http://www.allbookstores.com/author/Abdul_Sheriff.html).

- ISJ

### 3. BBC's response (Thu 30/04/2009 16:42)

Dear Abdul Sheriff

Thank you very much for your detailed reply to my colleague's request. It has certainly given me a lot to think about. I have no interest making a programme that is Islam- and Arab-bashing. We are at the beginning of our research - we are making the programme in June - so are presently gathering as much info as possible.

I agree the shorthand - Islamic slavery - is problematic, and will not be the title we end up with. But I am keen to look at the differences between what happened to slaves transported across the Atlantic, and the ones through Zanzibar. According to Ronald Segal's book *Islam's Black Slaves* - there were considerable differences between the two. Much of that difference was due to Islamic faith mitigating some of the worst excesses of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade - as you rightly mentioned.

This programme in no way is a means of showering Christianity with praise for its involvement in abolition - but during the 200th anniversary of Abolition a few years ago it was very obvious there had been a great deal of soul-searching / that the descendents of slaves had a strong and powerful voice in the States - and I wanted to see whether you could say the same for both the descendents of slaves in Zanzibar and Islamic leaders in the Arab world. If revolutionaries in the 1960s managed to use the history of slavery as legitimising excuse for their actions - is that not interesting in itself?

I'm sorry that our synopsis filled you with dismay - but it's a synopsis that isn't written in stone - it will be influenced by the experts we speak to along the way. I understand from your email that you're just about to go into retreat - and you sound as though you want nothing to do with this documentary. But if you change your mind we would be really interested in talking to you - to have a voice that challenges "the slavery tourist industry".

We will be in Zanzibar during the week beginning June 22nd.

All the best

Katy Hickman

## 4. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown

### Inconvenient Truths

I went to Zanzibar in June to make two radio documentaries. Oh lucky me, most readers will say, how wonderful. Increasingly popular with holidaymakers it offers untold pleasures- emerald forests and azure seas, blue skies with playful clouds, palm trees, coffee scented with cardamom, golden beaches, delectable food. They know not the bloodshed and agony that shaped this place. Nothing is as it has been made to seem. There is no innocence here, no easy forgetfulness, not for the inhabitants. They smile and laugh with visitors and try to please them (and because they are naturally hospitable, it has authenticity) but all the while unsettled scores and untold stories pulsate and throb through the veins of this part of the Tanzanian nation.

History has been buried here, deep in the sands, but never washed away. I often went to Zanzibar as a child, with my mum who was born in Dar es salaam. We would take a crowded ferry and stay at a hostel for poor women and their kids who wanted a subsidised break by the sea. The women in the local mosque provided lunch and we had a wonderful time. The island, a fabulous mix of Arab, African, Indian, Persian cultures and peoples was utterly unlike my racially divided hometown Kampala, Uganda.

Then one day my mum told me about the thousands of black slaves who had been captured in the hinterlands and brought to the island to be sold. She took me to Bagamoyo, the slave port on the mainland - the word means 'lay down your heart'. That trade went on from the 7th century to, it is claimed the beginning of the 20th century.

Through early history, enslavement was common around the world and East Africa was just one more lucrative location. But here the abomination went on longer than any other time or place. The traders were mostly Arab though some Indian merchants were actively involved. Those who captured and sold the humans to the businessmen were local African chiefs and henchmen. A febrile young child I was distraught when I learnt that Muslims had perpetuated this evil. How could it be? Prophet Mohammed had freed Bilal, a black slave and asked him to make the first ever call to prayer. Surely that meant something? And as the years went on and we learnt to look back with abhorrence at the practice of owning and exploiting humans, how come there was no acknowledgement of this systemic injustice in Zanzibar?

The questions circled around in my head obsessively when I was a young teen. Then came 1964 and the island detonated. A revolution led by African soldiers deposed the constitutional monarch, Sultan Seyyid Bin Abdullah. It was, in part, retaliation for slavery by people and upon people who were not responsible. It felt like some ancient God of vengeance had risen from the sea. They slaughtered anyone who looked Arab and some Indians too, took their daughters to rape and use, confiscated their properties and banished many. To this day there is no list of the dead, those tortured and dumped into the sea, the disappeared and the exiles. A few years on, the coup leaders went for Zanzibari Persians, plucked several beautiful young girls of the most affluent families- some as young as fourteen- and forced them into marriage with brutish military men.

Mum and I never went back to our favourite place. Terror spread across all East African countries among Asians who believed they would be next. Idi Amin in 1972 threw us out

of Uganda, but we were not subjected to the bloody ethnic massacres of Zanzibaris. Tanzanians celebrate the revolution every year and the important transformations it brought in education and health, but there is no mention of the murders and rapes.

For years I have wanted to reveal these veiled stories. After many years of trying to persuade commissioning editors, I finally was given that opportunity by the Heart and Sould strand on BBC World Service. Even before we left there was nervousness among academics, writers, fixers and exiles. I could understand the anxiety. Politicians make use of bad history for worse politics and they had done so for decades in Zanzibar.

I'm glad we had the courage to overcome the reservations. I interviewed Leila, 99, whose grand parents were enslaved. She could not forget the babies she said, her father's siblings, one still being breastfed, who were thrown into the forests. When we turned the tape off, her eyes glazed over and she threw up blood all over her lovely satin dress and me and might have died since. There is a memorial to the slaves now, near the church built by Christians who raise praise for the anti-slavery campaigner David Livingstone. We saw holding caves near a beach where, it is alleged human cargo was till smuggled until the 1920s. I discovered that people in my own Shia community were made huge profits selling and buying people and also that one of them, the richest Sir Tharia Topan became a passionate abolitionist. Europeans were also involved and the African suppliers. Yet they blame only Arabs, a travesty. There were fascinating differences between Atlantic and East African slavery. The latter allowed the children of master and slave to become part of the family and to rise to power. But the bitterness is the same.

The revolution was, some said, payback. But when we met the victims, some of whom had lost so many relatives or were still seeking them, that justification felt like an excuse. Those who knew the violated and stolen girls cried as they spoke. They were taking risks talking to us, but it was time they said. I spoke to many in Swahili and one of them witnessed the gutters running with Arab and Indian blood, 'like that of chickens slaughtered for Eid festivities'.

For me going back was a live lesson on the potency and fear of the whole historical truth. Those of Arab descent feel too defensive about the slave trade and want to focus on the revolution; Africans dwell on the trade and expect no mention of the barbaric acts of the revolutionaries.

Zanzibar is picking up- our leader the Aga Khan has just spent millions restoring the old Arab garden and main square. Zanzibaris are taking pride in their island once more. But I am apprehensive that it could all go wrong again because too much is unresolved. There will not be real, deep healing between the citizens of various ethnicities until everyone talks more honestly about past injustices. Without that paradise is but an illusion.

Return to Zanzibar on the BBC World Service, 25h and 26th of July

## **5. Follow-up from BBC** (sent Mon 15/06/2009 20:45)

Professor Sheriff,

I know that you are now on your retreat - and I have no desire to disturb you. But I wanted to write to thank you. A few months ago you were sent a hastily written brief

about a programme I'm making with Yasmin Alibhai-Brown - and you took the time to critique it and send it back.

I only wish I'd done a bit more research before I put it together - and had understood what Yasmin was saying to me. Many of the things I wrote down were her childhood memories which she now wants to explore and to understand with an adult's eye. They didn't warrant the certainty with which I presented them,

I have now read the Clarence-Smith book you suggested (and talked to him with Yasmin), and others like Frederick Cooper's books. And have listened to the wonderfully nuanced documentaries you made with Ruth Evans. I can see now why what I wrote would have made you rather despair, and I'm sorry for that.

I usually spend a good deal of time thinking and researching a story before I embark on it - but in this case I just had too much work to do in those first weeks and I'm afraid it showed!

Since then we have interviewed Abdulrazak Gurnah, and Farouk Topan - who we're also hoping to meet again when he's in Zanzibar next week. Abdulrazak said you may be writing in Germany at this time.

I'm sorry if we do miss you in Zanzibar, as everyone we have talked to has spoken of you extremely highly. But I did want you to know that I appreciate the time you spent putting me on the right track.

All the best,  
Katy Hickman

## **Additional note from BBC**

*As you will see from both my replies to Professor Sheriff I openly acknowledge that the initial brief for the programme was badly thought out. But between April, when that was written, and June, when we went to Zanzibar, I did a great deal of research and spoke to a lot of different people. The subsequent programmes we made were much more complex and nuanced than those initial thoughts imply. - Katy Hickman, email to ISJ (17-08-09).*

## **The programme: HEART AND SOUL - ARCHIVE**

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specialreports/heartandsoul\\_archive.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specialreports/heartandsoul_archive.shtml)

**Producer: Katy Hickman**

### **18/07/2009 - Return to Zanzibar (part one)**

Writer Yasmin Alibhai-Brown returns to Zanzibar, the idyllic island she visited as a child.

Listen Duration: 26:20

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/07/090720\\_heartsoul\\_180709.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/07/090720_heartsoul_180709.shtml)

The writer Yasmin Alibhai-Brown returns to Zanzibar, the idyllic island she visited as a child. It is here during holidays with her mother in the 50s and 60s, that she first found



the remnants of caves, used to hold thousands of slaves. It was here that she visited the church built over the biggest slave market in East Africa. And it was here that she questioned the role her faith played in slavery.

At one time Zanzibar, owned by the Sultan of Oman, was at the centre of the slave trade across East Africa. In the 18th and 19th centuries, hundreds of thousands of slaves were transported through this tiny island - some for markets in the Middle East, but the majority for local clove plantations and as domestic slaves. As a Muslim, Yasmin was brought up on the story of the freed slave Bilal. As she returns to Zanzibar on a very personal journey, she talks to those who remember the remnants of a secret trade that went on well into the 20th century. And she asks whether Muslim traders throughout history have used their faith to justify their profession.

## **25/07/2009 - Return to Zanzibar (part two)**

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown looks at the political battles of 20th century Zanzibar.

Listen Duration: 26:30

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/07/090728\\_heartsoul\\_250709.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/07/090728_heartsoul_250709.shtml)

In 1964 violence erupted on Zanzibar, many Arabs fled, many more were killed and their land re-distributed. No one knows how many people died. The revolution marked the end of Yasmin's visits to the island of her childhood. In her home in Uganda she was told it was revenge for the slave trade and ethnic tension increased. As Yasmin returns to Zanzibar on a very personal quest, she wants to explore the legacy of the history of slavery: how far were the memories of injustice used to fight political battles? And how much of the real story is remembered and commemorated? For Yasmin, Zanzibar was central to the formation of her own identity - it was the place that made her question her faith, her ethnicity and the history of her East African roots. She returns to talk to people there - the descendents of traders, slaves and Arab land-owners to find out whether the memory of slavery still haunts them, or whether the faith that many of them share can bring them together.

Presenter: Yasmin Alibhai-Brown