

The Baraza

A Grassroots Institution

ROMAN LOIMEIER

Sociological debates have long been dominated by categories of "formal" and "informal." This dichotomous approach, with its focus on the spectrum between "obvious" extremes, has eclipsed other ways of coming to terms with social life and the institutions therein. The *baraza* (pl. *mabaraza*), an important feature of Zanzibar's "public sphere," provides a way for understanding social institutions as a continuum of "realizations" that escape clear cut sociological definitions. Even the term *baraza* has many different notions that again reflect a spectrum of possibilities of social, spatial, and temporal organization.

In spatial terms, the *baraza* represents a spectrum of places where people meet, such as the verandah in front of a house. In *shamba* (countryside) areas the *baraza* would likely refer to a place near the local mosque, such as some benches, often under a simple shelter. Inside a house, a *baraza* would be a parlour for receiving visitors such as, again, the "audience chamber" of the Sultan of Zanzibar, or a part of the courtyard (*ua*), where women would meet in "their" *baraza*, the *uani*.

In organizational terms, a *baraza* may represent different degrees of formality and informality, institutionalization, and abstractness. A *baraza* might be a simple (informal) "meeting" of people, but it could also be a "council," or, in historical times, the "audience" of the Sultan of Zanzibar that was described as a *baraza*,² although such a *baraza* would also be called a *majlis*. Finally, it could refer to a vast range of clubs, unions, or associations such as the *Baraza la Kiswahili la Zanzibar* (The Kiswahili Association of Zanzibar) or the *Baraza Kuu la Waislamu wa Tanzania* (The Muslim Supreme Council of Tanzania), where membership is defined in more or less formal terms.

In temporal or time-linked terms, a *baraza* is connected with the specific times of the day when its members meet, such as the *baraza za wazee*, the "old men's *baraza*," at Jaws' corner that is frequented daily

Public or semi-public places where people meet to chat, communicate, quarrel, sit, and watch may be found in many societies: the Piazza in Italy, the beer-garden in Bavaria, or the majlis in Arabia, represent a few such examples.

Zanzibar's *baraza* is a place for the negotiation and observation of the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. Sitting in a *baraza* provides an opportunity to experience every day life at its most local.¹

between *ʿasr* and *maghrib* prayers. In fact, a single *baraza* (in the spatial sense of the term) could be occupied in the course of a day by different groups of *watu wa barazani*, "people of the *baraza*." Different concepts of day and night are important for the constitution of *mabaraza* as the members of the respective *mabaraza* meet in "their" *baraza* at a specific time of the day/night, and may arrange for meet-

ings at these times. Indeed each *baraza* is linked with the stories of that specific place and its people, and, thus, with local history. A *baraza* may be regarded, thus, as a "space" that has come to life as a "place."³ Consequently, a *baraza* has stopped to be "something in between," i.e. pure (undefined) "space," and has become "something," namely a distinct "Platz," a place that is known for the stories associated with it, for its specific history, as well as for the people meeting there.

Mabaraza represent thus a broad spectrum of different forms of organization, as well as different notions of place and space that are again defined in different temporal terms. *Mabaraza* may consequently appear to represent a rather vague notion of the organization of the "public sphere" in Zanzibar. Yet, *mabaraza* are not entirely amorphous for they follow a distinct set of rules and are linked to a distinct code of behaviour. These rules and codes apply to the Zanzibar Stone Town street *baraza* that meets in the oldest part of Zanzibar Town. Stone Town is characterized by its cosmopolitan population of about 20,000 inhabitants that include Africans, Indians, and Arabs, and by the numerous picturesque multi-storeyed houses, the dozens of small mosques and Quran schools, and a multitude of shops that increasingly cater to tourism. Although Stone Town may comprise only one square kilometre in size, the length of the narrow alleys add up to more than 20 kilometres, not considering the huge area of Ng'ambo, "the other side," the urban agglomeration of approximately 380,000 people that is also home to numerous *mabaraza*.

When walking through Stone Town, it is rather easy to meet *mabaraza* "in session." In fact, it might be said that virtually every house in Zanzibar has its own *baraza*. Alas, most of these *mabaraza* are mainly intended for the people of the house, both men and women, although sitting is gendered. "House *mabaraza*" are thus not really "public" and would be attended only by those people who actually live in a specific house, or some passers-by who greet somebody from the house. "Communal *mabaraza*," by contrast, would not be necessarily associated with a specific (private) house, but would attract people from diverse backgrounds within a specific neighbourhood. Communal *baraza* would also often be situated at strategic points, such as a small opening in an alley, where a coffee-maker would sell his coffee and attract members of the neighbourhood. "Public *mabaraza*," on the other hand, would denote all those *mabaraza* that attract people from an even greater geographic scope. Out of a total of some

Typical family home in Stone Town with Baraza, Zanzibar



PHOTO BY ROMAN LOIMEIER, 2004

At the Grassroots

300-400 mabaraza in Stone Town, only 50-60 of them can be said to be "communal" and even fewer are "famous" public mabaraza, such as the mabaraza at Mskiti Ruta (Ruta mosque), where religious scholars meet, the baraza of the "intellectuals" close to the "Manispa" (the "City Hall" baraza), the "Passing Show Hotel *mbao* players baraza," or the "poets" baraza of Bwana Mkelle." These represent mabaraza that are famous for their "members," their particular orientation, or their long history. It is, thus, necessary to differentiate between "house" mabaraza and "public" as well as "communal" mabaraza, although boundaries are fluid.

While mabaraza may have existed in the shamba areas of Zanzibar even before the nineteenth century, when Zanzibar was the centre of the `Umani-Sultanate of Zanzibar, they were a comparatively recent feature of Stone Town where they started to develop only after the revolution in 1964. This revolution not only put an end to the rule of the Sultans and caused the death and the expulsion of thousands of "Arab" and "Indian" Zanzibaris, but also led to the political unification of Zanzibar and Tanganyika to form the Federal Republic of Tanzania. On account of these events, the structure of the population in Stone Town changed dramatically after 1964: while Stone Town had been, until 1964, an area for the rich and aristocratic who would never sit "in the street" as they had their in-door majlis, the "poor" and "common" people from Ng'ambo who moved into Stone Town after 1964 brought along their mabaraza. Before 1984, mabaraza had largely been confined, in Stone Town, to the market areas, the mosques, and public places, or the poorer and "popular" quarters in Stone Town. The development of mabaraza has to be seen, consequently, as a feature of social change (and development), characterized for parts of Stone Town such as Shangani where mabaraza scarcely existed before 1964, as a development from "majlis to baraza" (i.e. from meeting and sitting inside the house to meeting and sitting outside the house). In a broader sense, a change in social context will also influence the character of the mabaraza of a specific locality. As the "rich and aristocratic" disappeared from Stone Town after 1964, so too did the majority of *majlis*. The number of mabaraza, on the other hand, has multiplied considerably, although some old and famous mabaraza such as the baraza of Sayyid Bâ Wazîr close to Mskiti Barza, or the baraza of Shaykh Mas'ûd b. `Alî ar-Riyâmî disappeared after 1964 when most of their members were killed or exiled in the revolution. The constant influx of people into Stone Town after 1964 has led to the formation of new mabaraza that "go with time" (*wanakwenda na wakati*), such as the baraza of the "fans of Manchester United" in Malindi, or the baraza of the *mbao*-players in Jaws' Corner that was formed in the 1980s when the police station at this central intersection of Stone Town was removed as part of the "Stone Town Conservation Programme."⁴

With respect to the contemporary social character of the Zanzibar Stone Town baraza, membership may appear again to be rather informal: there is no formal membership, and there are no membership fees or membership cards. Yet, membership is defined all the same. Everybody may theoretically join any baraza. Mabaraza in fact provide platforms of communication for virtually everybody, old and young, rich and poor, men and women, even if mabaraza are usually gendered (I have so far not heard of mixed mabaraza and well-known women's mabaraza are still rare in some parts of Stone Town), even if they tend to unite "members" of similar occupational and social backgrounds. At the same time, mabaraza may be rather heterogeneous when it comes to political, ethnic, or religious orientation, though again not necessarily so. A baraza usually develops a specific character over time, and some mabaraza may be more "open" than others. Thus, some mabaraza may be perceived as rather hermetic, and their members will probably stop their conversation, possibly on sensitive issues such as politics, when an unknown person would try to join. Recruitment into such a



PHOTO BY ROMAN LOIMEIER, 2004

baraza is a process of conscious inclusion initiated only by its members. Living in a specific neighbourhood, regular passing by a specific baraza and respectfully greeting the members, sticking to the rules of *heshima* (respect) and *adabu* (proper and good manners), having a friend or friends in the baraza, or having similar occupational, religious, political, or other interests and orientations may help to speed up the process of being invited to join a specific baraza, but are not an automatic bridge from non-membership to membership, from exclusion to inclusion.⁵

For the most part mabaraza are open and would welcome any "non-member" to join, either on a permanent or a temporal basis (i.e. for short slots of time only), although some degree of continuity of residence in a specific area may help to speed-up integration into a specific baraza. The varying open/closed-ness of mabaraza shows again that it is very difficult to translate the concept of the baraza into one of Max Weber's "ideal types." Most of what is said about the mabaraza may be true for most mabaraza, but not necessarily for all. Due to the semi-public, semi-formal, and semi-open character of the mabaraza, the baraza escapes efforts of categorization. Mabaraza may acquire, thus, a multitude of forms that have in common that its members constitute a group of people who follow specific rules of conduct that are binding for all members of the baraza. As such, mabaraza are natural networks of people who have known each other for some time and consequently trust each other. Mabaraza are, thus, the most basic institution of Zanzibari society.⁶ They have acquired considerable political importance and were, in fact, prohibited in 1967 by the "Revolutionary Government" of Zanzibar as possible cells of political protest. Since the early 1980s, the mabaraza have reappeared and are waxing stronger than before, not only as the most basic social institution of Zanzibari society but also as the most important venue for public political debates. Many mabaraza represent debating clubs where a range of political (and religious) issues are discussed, and can be conceptualized as a fundamental element for the development of democratic structures in Zanzibar from "below."

Baraza in session, Stone Town, Zanzibar

Notes

1. An extensive presentation of the baraza will be published under the title "Sit Local, Think Global: The Baraza in Zanzibar" in a volume edited by A. Tayob on "Islam and Public Life in Africa."
2. Emily Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar* (Zanzibar: Gallery Publications, 1998), 125.
3. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 79ff.
4. Conversation with E. Meffert, 7 August 2004.
5. Conversations with Abdul Sheriff, 22 July 2004 and Mwalimu Idris, 20 May 2004.
6. Conversation with Fatma Alloo, 11 March 2003.

Roman Loimeier is a research fellow in the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Bayreuth.
Email: roman.loimeier@uni-bayreuth.de