Engaging Colonial Nostalgia

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One of modernity’s permanent laments concerns the loss of a better past, the memory of living in a securely circumscribed place, with a sense of stable boundaries and a place-bound culture with its regular flow of time and a core of permanent relations. Perhaps such days have always been a dream rather than a reality, a phantasmagoria of loss generated by modernity itself rather than its prehistory. But the dream does have staying power.

—Andreas Huyssen, “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia”

Longing on a large scale is what makes history.

—Dom DeLillo, Underworld

During my research on the effects of transnational efforts to conserve a “historic” section of Zanzibar city, residents frequently invoked the past as a critique of the present, lamenting the current state of urban conditions. “If you had seen the city as it existed in the past,” a young Zanzibari of Comorian descent assured me, “tears would fall from your eyes now” (interview with Amir Issa, November 23, 1993). At first such comments struck me as nothing more than an aberration. After all, my interlocutor was born well after the demise of colonialism, and his rosy depiction of British rule appeared to me to be questionable at best. However, as others chimed in with similar sentiments, my easy dismissal of them began to seem less certain. Only recently have I fully begun to appreciate their significance and to probe my hesitation to formulate them explicitly as questions for research.

If, as Richard Werbner has observed, the “boom in colonial nostalgia is striking” (1998:1), it has not as yet sparked any sustained anthropological scrutiny. My inability to recognize the scope and significance of colonial nostalgia in Zanzibar has deep roots—both theoretical and political. Nostalgia was a crucial impetus for anthropological theory and method throughout the formative period of the discipline, and this has made coming to terms with it in the field all the more difficult.
To most contemporary ethnographers, expressions of colonial nostalgia are deeply unsettling. As with the African mimicry discussed by James Ferguson (2002), such comments typically provoke embarrassment, avoidance, or disbelief.

In this article, I pose colonial nostalgia as a distinctively anthropological problem by sketching some of its crucial dimensions as a social phenomenon to suggest how we might more productively engage with it in ethnographic terms. In both popular and academic contexts, nostalgia is frequently portrayed as a reaction or response to more general forces—capitalist restructuring, for example, or the onslaught of modernity. As a result, it is often treated as a unified, consistent, and shared phenomenon—a sensibility suffusing an entire social field. Nostalgic discourses, however, are anything but singular. In Zanzibar, as elsewhere, they circulate in a social terrain in which diverse forms of memory are at play. A truly ethnographic engagement with nostalgia requires that we acknowledge and seek to account for multiple strands of remembrance, seeing how they coexist, combine, and/or conflict. In the best anthropological tradition, highlighting the social bases of nostalgic longings entails setting such desires within the detailed contours of a changing ethnographic landscape. Nostalgia is shaped by specific cultural concerns and struggles; and as with other forms of memory practice, it can only be understood in particular historical and spatial contexts. But nostalgia also operates with a crucial difference: rather than evoking commonality and continuity, it works as a mode of social memory by emphasizing distance and disjuncture, utilizing these diacritics of modernity as a means of critically framing the present.

**Mapping Colonial Nostalgia**

During the 1980s, expressions of imperial nostalgia became a familiar part of the mass culture and media landscape linked to newly assertive conservative movements in both the United States and Britain. In the wake of Reagan and Thatcher, various scholars called attention to a host of cultural productions and products in former metropoles that evoked the glamour or grandeur of imperial spaces and moments. In general, this was a terrain most centrally mapped out by cultural studies, literary, and film theorists (e.g., Shohat and Stam 1994), with some important exceptions (e.g., Rosaldo 1989). Nostalgia moved beyond depictions on screen, seeping into the stuff of everyday life, linking desire to design, décor, and dress (see Cover). As a cultural mode, it was increasingly discussed in terms of the dizzying pace of product cycles, the saturation of mass merchandising, and the heightened salience of consumption (Appadurai 1996; Denzin 1990; Lowenthal 1989). In cultural studies accounts, imperial nostalgia was also linked to the impact of postcolonial developments in the West. As a phenomenon, it was broadly connected to revisionist politics and history, understood as a response to a loss of global position or prestige, and treated as a form of reaction—something that arose in the context of a perceived erosion of old geopolitical hierarchies, spatial borders, social boundaries, and lines of identity.
Colonial nostalgia is clearly connected to its imperial counterpart, but it also points to rather more disturbing and difficult features of the contemporary global landscape. We can certainly comprehend why conservatives or social elites in former metropoles might long for a return to empire. Likewise, we can understand the logic behind the marketing of colonial chic, recycling imperialism as the stuff of consumer desire. Mass media depictions of postcolonial Africa as a space of crisis and lack are also common in the West. But what does it mean when Africans voice similar views, seemingly harking back to colonialism as a better age? How exactly do we come to terms with expressions of colonial nostalgia by the descendents of those who struggled long and hard to overcome the effects of European domination and exploitation? Not long after returning from the field, this question was powerfully framed for me by a news report on Angola 25 years after independence. The story focused on Kuito, described as a “graceful colonial city once known for its gardens, its fountains, and its rich soil” and now devastated by the long civil war. “Here,” the reporter observed, “in a far-flung provincial capital of America’s eighth-largest oil supplier, history has seemingly reversed course, leaving entire communities with dimming memories of modernity” (Swarms 2000:1). The conflict had isolated cities and disrupted administration; infrastructure was either damaged or decayed, depriving residents of basic services. The correspondent interviewed an administrator in the local bureau of housing rehabilitation, Salomao Canhanga, who lamented the lack of progress in rebuilding by citing chronic shortages of funds and materials:

His friends and neighbors beg for help with the gaping holes left by falling mortar shells. Mr. Canhanga tells them the office has no money for repairs. Even he has to scavenge for wood planks and straw mats to replace the glass windows in his house that were shattered by rebel attacks seven years ago. As for sanitation? He shrugs his shoulders. “Those workers don’t have cars,” Mr. Canhanga said gloomily. “We don’t have trash cans. We have nothing, nothing.” Mr. Canhanga earns about $16 a month and grows vegetables to feed his family. His youngest son has only fuzzy memories of glass windows or houses without bullet holes. And these days, some of his colleagues look back on their Portuguese oppressors with nostalgia. “There’s a feeling of sadness,” he admitted. “People see independence as suffering. That’s how they understand it. Some people say, ‘When is this independence going to end?’” [Swarms 2000:6]

These sentiments could have come from V. S. Naipaul at his most sour. The equation Canhanga draws between independence and suffering can only strike us as a terribly bleak coda to the historic struggles of anticolonial movements and the hopes and promises of liberation once voiced so urgently and eloquently in Africa by Fanon, Césaire, and Nyerere. In this case, any attempt to cast colonial nostalgia as purely retrograde or reactionary seems dubious at best. If we react to it with embarrassment or distaste, we have already foreclosed the very question that begs to be answered: What social and political desires are postcolonial Africans giving voice to when they speak well of the colonial past? As we shall see in the case of Zanzibar, multiple forms of memory are operating, with diverse temporalities and conceptions of the past evoked for radically different cultural purposes. Moreover,
these discourses are complexly intertwined with nostalgic reconstructions of the more recent socialist past, as the realm of the social has been eviscerated by neoliberal imperatives to "build" the economy. Rather than viewing nostalgia as poor history, we need to engage with it as a social practice that mobilizes various signs of the past (colonial and otherwise) in the context of contemporary struggles.

Reconstructing Urban Space

Zanzibar city has often been described as a classic colonial dual order. The older section, now named Mji Mkongwe (but known as Stone Town in English), took shape on a triangular peninsula connected to the main island by a small neck of land. Although part of this area was inhabited going back to the 12th century (Sheriff 1995a), most of the present-day city was built since the 1830s, when the capital of the Omani sultanate was transferred to Zanzibar by Seyyid Said bin Sultan. By the time the British assumed formal control in 1890, the urban core was well established as the ceremonial and commercial heart of the sultanate. Colonial officials called it "town proper" and tried to sharpen its distinctiveness as an elite space. Most wealthy Arabs, Indians, and Europeans resided there in substantial stone structures three and four stories high. Across a tidal creek lay Ng’amo (the other side), an area deprived of municipal services during the colonial period where the majority population, mostly Africans of diverse origin, recent migrants, freed slaves, and the working class, resided in largely single-story wattle and daub dwellings. This made for an urban milieu that was broadly (if incompletely) structured by a series of ideological and material contrasts: "Arab" and "Indian" versus "African," stone structures versus mud huts, rich versus poor, and the "town proper" versus Ng’amo as the other side of the tracks.

The colonial social and spatial order was decisively overturned by the revolution of January 1964, which occupied and reworked the old city under the sign of Africanization and socialism. Most of the former elite fled into exile, and their mansions and monumental structures were turned into public housing or centers of social services. As one political activist told me, "The houses themselves were just abandoned when their owners fled abroad and then later nationalized. And those ones, those are the ones that were then given to people, especially African folk" (interview with Issa Rashid Juma, June 29, 1995). Less privileged Zanzibaris from periurban and rural areas moved in to claim the city center. All land was nationalized; large plantations were broken up and redistributed to smallholders in three-acre plots. The state assumed control of business activity in the once-vigorous commercial sector, monopolizing the import–export trade. The old city, the space of the former elite, was not demolished but simply allowed to languish as a relic of an outmoded social form. In the meantime, it was imaginatively reoccupied: the cooking fires of peasants and hanging laundry took over the balconies of the Sultan’s palace.
The revolution was animated by a distinctly authoritarian sense of political order. The sole party brooked little dissent, enforcing social discipline through its security apparatus and ten-house cell committees. Citizens were forbidden to trade, travel, or talk freely. Movement in and out of the islands was sharply restricted. Outside sources of information, imported commodities, and investment capital were nonexistent. The revolutionary government sought to legitimize its rule and mobilize popular opinion by delivering social services. Free health care and education were instituted, and the provision of “modern” housing became a key preoccupation. In rural areas and in Ng’ambo, considerable resources were diverted to construct modernist blocks of public housing under East German sponsorship in the late 1960s and 1970s.

By the time I first arrived in Zanzibar in 1984, the revolution was on shaky ground. The clove economy that had supported the revolutionary government had largely collapsed. Between 1976 and 1985, economic performance declined by a full 27 percent (Muhajir 1993:43). Social spending was stagnant, unable to keep pace with a growing population. Housing shortages were becoming particularly acute. Basic goods were in short supply, and rationing for rice, flour, sugar, and clothing was a staple of daily life. A Zanzibari friend remembered a rain poncho I had given him that he wore until it fell apart, remarking on the privations of the period: “You couldn’t even buy shoes. If you saw an acquaintance in the market with fancy shoes, you would say, look at those Adidas, look at those Pumas, and you would know that whoever had them had a friend in Europe or America sending them such things. Or even dungarees or a T-shirt, these were rare things; you couldn’t obtain them at all” (interview with Salim Sheha Tumbo, May 10, 1995). Unable to supply the “goods” of life, the state faced increasing levels of discontent. In the streets, ujamaa socialism was widely seen as the source of economic and social stagnation not to mention urban collapse.

With the push to create new blocks of flats, older buildings had received little maintenance; after 20 years, the urban core was in an advancing state of decay (see Figure 1). Under the force of monsoon rains, the stone structures were crumbling; many were in a critical state, and some had already collapsed, killing residents or passers-by (LaNier et al. 1983). In light of budget constraints and housing shortages, the idea of shoring up the existing built fabric took on new urgency. The state had little option but to solicit external technical assistance, initially approaching UNESCO. A preliminary survey took note of a number of architecturally significant structures in the older section of the city. By listing these, the government hoped to gain recognition from the World Heritage List and funding for conservation. This application was eventually denied, but as a series of assessment and aid missions passed through in the ensuing years, the question of historic preservation began to predominate, pushing housing provision into the background. Stone Town was no longer simply a space for sociability or shelter for citizens. Prompted by transnational donors, the state increasingly saw the city as an asset to be deployed in rebuilding the economy. Transnational donors used...
development aid as a means to pressure the state to remake itself along neoliberal lines. This shift in governmental logic went hand in hand with the displacement of population from Stone Town and a sharp decline in the local social life of the city.

In the early 1980s, a Chinese planning team singled out “Stone Town” as a “famous historic city” unique along the East African coast. The planners argued that the area was potentially an economic asset, a national resource that should be used for tourist development (Qian and the Chinese City Planning Team 1982). These ideas were later taken up and elaborated by Western conservationists, who endorsed privatization and tourism as strategies to “save” Mji Mkongwe. In 1983, a UN Habitat team issued the first conservation master plan for the city (LaNier et al. 1983). A host of proposed projects and studies followed, with yet another full master plan in the early 1990s, sponsored this time by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and its Historic Cities Support Program. These schemes were flawed in numerous ways—the formulation of a master plan cost well over a million dollars and took a decade to frame, but no funds were ever found to implement it. Following the neoliberal ethic of Western aid policy in the age of Reagan and Thatcher, conservationists argued that privatization was the only way to “save” the city. Without a market stimulus, they alleged, history and heritage had no future. The state should sell off its properties, stop subsidizing rents, and think of ways to attract external investors and market the city.

With a new president and the Third Stage (Awamu Tatu) of the revolution in the mid-1980s, the state embraced economic liberalization with a vengeance, relying on external investors and returning exiles from the Gulf States, India, and
Europe to produce an upsurge in tourism, development, and commercial activity. The last decade has seen a boom of building and restoration throughout the city. As property values soared beyond the reach of most Zanzibaris, many were forced to relocate outside the city. Public buildings were privatized and converted into tourist facilities. Investors and wealthy exiles bought out poorer residents and transformed their dwellings into hotels or luxury homes. Urban development in this context has resulted in highly contained niches of wealth and comfort, pockets of privilege that have been walled off from the effects of public sector decline. As the city was being transformed around them, many Zanzibaris, especially public workers, teachers, small traders, and craftspeople, were increasingly left behind. Unable to break out of the local shilling economy (in which the minimum monthly wage in 1995 was $11), their low wages were inadequate to supply even the basic necessities of life. The unemployed, especially the young, faced an even more precarious struggle to gain a place in the city and survive. High inflation and unemployment, sharp rises in subsistence and housing costs, diminished municipal services, and the collapse of public hospitals and schools—all of these features are crucial components of the present in Zanzibar. Without comprehending these forces, we cannot hope to understand nostalgic reconstructions of the Zanzibari past.

The Geography of Remembrance (in the Wake of Revolution)

Nostalgia (colonial or otherwise) does not flower in just any soil. Certain factors are necessary for its emergence. A sense of linear historical time is essential. If history ends in redemption or if history cycles around in eternal return, then nostalgia becomes redundant. The flow of time also must not only be irretrievable but tinged with loss. The present must be compared to other moments and marked as a moment of decline—as in the fall of empires, for example, or national eclipse, or a loss of power and position by a particular social group. Moreover, nostalgia requires an object world to seize on—buildings, fashion, images, and the ephemera of everyday life. A society premised on ruthlessly junking old or outmoded objects in favor of the latest technology is less likely to foster regret or longing for the past (Chase and Shaw 1989:2–4).

These general factors also operate in concert with a range of more specific historical forces. Fred Davis (1979:49) notes that nostalgia is a discourse sparked by transition and discontinuity. Rapid shifts fuel nostalgia, and as Elizabeth Wilson reminds us, “the massive changes that take place in cities induce this emotion to an intense degree” (1997:137). In Zanzibar, as throughout much of the former socialist world, citizens have witnessed the sudden and seemingly incomprehensible collapse of socialist polities, economies, and values. “Reconstruction” in Eastern Europe, as Svetlana Boym (2001) has argued, has provided a fertile ground for nostalgia to flourish. Things once deemed relatively stable and durable—the face of the built landscape, basic provisions of health and welfare, and the right to work—have seemingly evaporated into thin air, eroding like the value of local
currencies (Berman 1982). Moreover, throughout much of Africa one also finds a widespread and profound sense of foreboding, a perceived crisis in the fundamental conditions of social production and reproduction brought on by neoliberal policies and market orthodoxies. From Angola to Zanzibar, people are confronting the restructurings of global capital in terms of an economics of impossibility that renders daily life ever more precarious (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Ferguson 1999; Hansen 2000; Weiss 2002).

During my fieldwork in the mid-1990s, urban Zanzibaris frequently lamented the present state of the city. The colonial period in particular, and to a lesser extent the revolution, was portrayed in a highly idealized light, as a time when things worked, the law was the law, and a shilling went a long way. Although some acknowledged that the colonial state was strict or even harsh at times, at least it had rules, they argued, and through the effectiveness of its planning and management, the city was a clean and orderly space. Residents typically attributed the current disorder of the urban sphere to a failure of moral will: a general erosion in imani (faith or righteousness), the collapse of community, and the indifference or incompetence of postcolonial regimes. Selfishness and greed were alleged to be the source of urban problems rather than more structural or historical causes.

Not surprisingly, the idealized past invoked by informants was nowhere to be found in the colonial archives, which were filled instead with lamentations about dirty streets, disorder, and deterioration that bore striking resemblance to contemporary complaints. Colonial rule, far from creating the conditions for urban order, had sown bureaucratic and legal chaos in a series of failed plans that made the recent conservation versions look like modest boondoggles by way of comparison. Indeed, many of the sources of contemporary urban ills can be traced back to colonial malfeasance and incompetence (Bissell 1999). Can we then say that colonial nostalgia is just misguided history or willful misrecognition? Is it simply the result of false consciousness or fantasy? None of these characterizations seem very convincing insofar as they rest on a dubious epistemological divide between observer and observed: “we” (presumably Western, educated, and privileged) see history in the clear light of day, whereas “they” (the people without history, subalterns, and informants) indulge in myths or mysticism. This separation allocates a different status and rationality to ethnographers and their “subjects,” suggesting they are fundamentally opposed. But anthropologists have long been motivated by the very nostalgic impulses we seek to decry in the field, and we must recognize how nostalgia has shaped anthropology as a discipline as well as Western modernity more broadly.

From Social Disease to Social Theory: A Short (Anthropological) History of Nostalgia

Susan Stewart (1984:23) defined nostalgia as a “social disease.” It was originally identified in the 1680s as a sickness of youth, afflicting Swiss mercenaries
fighting in far-off lands. The symptoms included despondency, melancholy, frequent bouts of weeping, anorexia, a generalized wasting away, and even attempts at suicide (Davis 1979; Starobinski 1966; Turner 1987). Given that nostalgia was deeply connected to forms of dislocation, we can understand how it had significant implications for subsequent European expansion, colonialism, and eventually anthropology. During the 19th century, physiological understandings of nostalgia gradually waned, as the term, under the influence of romanticism, came to designate a more general condition of estrangement, an essentially incurable state. As a kind of ontological alienation, nostalgia later became deeply significant for social theory, especially in the German tradition. Bryan Turner has outlined a nostalgic paradigm that has strongly shaped social thought in the West. First, he notes, there is the notion of history as decline and fall, involving a significant departure from a golden epoch of homefulness. Second, there is an awareness of fragmentation and plurality, a sense of loss of cohesion, certainty, and wholeness (for instance, the notion that the moral values that once sheltered us have dissolved in the face of capitalism, industrialization, or the growth of cities). Third, there is the perceived loss of personal autonomy (the end of face-to-face relations and genuine emotional connection with the intrusion of the state and bureaucracy into everyday life). Finally, there is dismay over the disappearance of lifeworlds characterized by such values as “simplicity, authenticity, and spontaneity” (Turner 1994:120–121; see also Turner 1987; Frow 1997).

“The will to nostalgia,” the sociologist Roland Robertson (1990:49) writes, “is indeed a distinctive issue of modernity,” something without which it is difficult to imagine an entire critical tradition that includes Marx and the Frankfurt school, Benjamin, Durkheim, Tönnies, Simmel, and Weber. Out of the nostalgic framework that Turner describes we see the emergence of the structural oppositions used to distinguish tradition from modernity: authentic and inauthentic experience; Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft; organic and mechanical solidarity; status and contract; use value and exchange value (Frow 1997:81). The formative history of anthropological thought and practice has been marked, as Rosaldo (1989:81) observes, by mourning over the waning of traditional society or the vanishing primitive. Even as Bronislaw Malinowski was hailing the birth of a new field science in Argonauts of the Western Pacific, he began by noting that anthropology was in a “sadly ludicrous, not to say tragic, position”:

At the very moment it begins to put its workshop in order, to forge its proper tools, to start ready for work on its appointed task, the material of its study melts away with hopeless rapidity. Just now, when the methods and aims of scientific field ethnology have taken shape, when men fully trained for the work have begun to travel into savage countries and study their inhabitants—these die away before our very eyes. . . . The hope of gaining a new vision of savage humanity through the labours of scientific specialists opens out like a mirage, vanishing almost as soon as perceived. [1950:xv]

This tragic consciousness of change was critical in the development of anthropology as a form of scientific rationality premised on encountering and
encompassing lifeworlds of authentic, aboriginal, and primitive experience—
worlds that were seen as disappearing or dissolving in the face of the very forces
of colonial modernity that made anthropology possible in the first place. At the
heart of this dilemma we find a palpable and painful sense of loss. A powerful, if
unacknowledged, nostalgia gave shape to anthropology in its salvage mode: a dis-
cipline seeking to rescue whole worlds from the ravages of time, to make sense of
social forms fast fading away (Clifford 1986). From 19th-century expeditions and
exhibitions, from the Pitt-Rivers museum to the work of Boas and his followers,
we can see the enormous amount of effort expended on the mournful task of rescu-
ing the remains of culture: codifying customs, seeking commentary, constructing
the archive, collecting a vast array of material culture (Clifford 1988; Cole 1985;

Few anthropologists have acknowledged the significance of nostalgia for the
discipline, much less analyzed the implications or consequences involved. To do
so would have required a radical reconstitution of the field, placing many of its
most cherished assumptions and practices in doubt. Classical ethnographers typi-
cally construed nostalgia as an “error” committed by others. As Malinowski flatly
declared, “the antiquarian and romantic tendency toward the retrospective and re-
constructive is often nothing but an evasion of the real issues” (1945:6). Or as
Meyer Fortes phrased it, “nostalgia for the ‘unspoiled savage’ is usually found
among those who get their living from breaking up primitive societies and ‘cor-
rupting’ the savage—government officials, traders, missionaries” (1945:223). Well
into the 1970s, nostalgia continued to serve as the secret sharer of anthropological
thought—a sensibility that informed and animated theory but remained itself
untheorized. Ethnographers could continue to dismiss nostalgia in practice only
so long as they managed to distance themselves from it in theory and project
it onto others cast as fundamentally different. To engage more productively with
expressions of nostalgia in the field requires us to recast the terms of debate, recon-
ceptualizing nostalgia as a distinctively ethnographic problem and exploring its
diverse dimensions in the domain of everyday social worlds.

From the social sciences to cultural studies and the humanities, nostalgia has
generally been understood as perverse, if not pathological. It has been closely
associated with a specifically counter-Enlightenment tradition, embraced by na-
tionalists and romantics alike. Tinged with echoes of Herder and Rousseau, it is
typically dismissed as antimodern and regressive. As a legacy of the gendered
terms of classical social thought, nostalgia has also been viewed as an emotional
affair and hence regarded as irrational. In advocating for “rescue projects” moti-
vated by deep affective engagement, Virginia Domínguez (2000) has underscored
the continuing squeamishness of scholars when confronted with love or affection
as an animating spirit in research. We continue to see nostalgia condemned as sen-
timental, sloppy, too easy, and indulgent. As a false or fictitious history, the product
of fantasy, nostalgia lacks a “proper” distance or objectivity. Moreover, it is typ-
ically represented as a reaction to a larger and more encompassing set of forces:
modernity or modernization; consumption, spectacle, and the eclipse of history; postmodernism; transnational or late capitalism; and, of course, globalization.

Not only does nostalgia appear in much of this literature as retrograde and reactionary, it is also represented as having a uniform and pervasive character, as something that suffuses or saturates an entire social field—and this undifferentiated approach to social discourse and practice seems especially problematic from an ethnographic perspective. Nostalgic expressions may indeed be retrograde or right wing in certain cases—but they are not by any means necessarily so or everywhere the same. If, as Nicholas Thomas (1994) suggests, we need to revise global theories of colonialism that do not allow for heterogeneity and difference, then we should do the same with colonial nostalgia: in other words, we must pay greater attention to the specific geographies and particular histories of discourses and practices organized around logics of longing and loss. We need to recognize more explicitly that nostalgia “is a cultural practice, not a given content; its forms, meanings and effects shift with the context—it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present” (Stewart 1988:227).

A reconsideration of nostalgia, its scope and significance, seems timely now on several counts. Anthropologists have grappled in recent decades with questions as to how the traditional strengths of the discipline, its core interests and methodologies, can be extended to embrace new areas and problematics—mass media and culture, transnational flows and forces, globalization, migration, and refugee movements. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) have pointed out, many of us find ourselves encountering fields in which space, identity, and culture no longer neatly coincide. Discursively and historically linked to estrangement, to being out of place and far from home, nostalgia would seem to be a key issue for a contemporary anthropology concerned with topics such as diaspora, displacement, and deterritorialization. The stakes here are more than merely academic: On the ground in Zanzibar as elsewhere, nostalgia provides a crucial means of coming to terms with the disparate ways that people experience and understand processes of dislocation in the midst of a “new phase of nostalgia-producing globalization” (Robertson 1990:53).

Returning to the Field: Colonial Nostalgia, Collective Memory, and the Creation of “Stone Town”

Nostalgic reconstructions of the past were anything but uniform in Zanzibar, and the first task is to capture these many dimensions within a complicated and contested terrain. To gain critical purchase, nostalgic discourses imaginatively rework time and space, conjuring up the plenitude of the past as a means of measuring the present. But this has nothing to do with the return of the repressed—colonial nostalgia is not some perverse or masochistic desire for the restoration of colonialism by those who were once subject to it. Nostalgia, after all, involves the longing for something that cannot be restored, something dead and gone. It precisely marks
the distance between the “then” and “now,” firmly anchoring colonialism in a far-off horizon, a mythic and memorialized frame. Here as elsewhere, nostalgia speaks of aspiration without possibility, deploying sensibilities and values drawn from the past in the context of current struggles. In both theory and practice, we need to be attentive to the different registers and forms of social memory at play. “Memories,” as John Gillis reminds us, “help us make sense of the world we live in; and ‘memory work’ is, like any other kind of physical or mental labor, embedded in complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end” (1994:3).

In her recent work on West African memories of the slave trade, Rosalind Shaw characterizes discursive and practical memory as “two poles of a continuum that does not entail a zero-sum conception of particular cultural forms as located exclusively at one or another of these extremes” (2002:7–8). Something similar is at work in Zanzibar, where there is a quite contested interplay of diverse social memory practices. Distinctions here are crucial. Although nostalgia is fueled by a sense of modernity as rupture, hard-edged and historically discontinuous, collective remembrance typically emerges out of efforts to forge a shared (if illusory) sense of group identity, cohesion, and long-term continuities. These divergent forms of memory practice are not mutually inconsistent or even contradictory; indeed, in certain circumstances they can feed each other. In this regard, we can see how “memory work” is neither monolithic nor mystical. To Kerwin Klein, the rise of scholarly interest in memory is a product of an eclipse of critical and secular historical practice. Klein criticizes the “memory industry” as a “reaction-formation,” something that allows us to “have our essentialism and deconstruct it, too” (2000:144). But “memory talk” is not all the same, nor is it necessarily imbued with therapeutic and theological overtones as he suggests. Indeed, all along the spectrum in Zanzibar, these memory practices are being produced precisely through “critical” and “secular” struggles over social differences, sociopolitical transformation, and a rapidly changing political economy. Something more than the reenchantment of history is afoot.

Nostalgia in Zanzibar has flourished precisely at a moment when the state and outside conservationists have sought to remake Stone Town under market conditions. Indeed, the harsh realities of neoliberal restructuring have gone hand in hand with efforts to portray the city as the product of a shared culture, historically continuous and enshrined in collective memory. Here, nostalgic reconstructions of the past can best be understood as a disruptive commentary on such claims. Conservation programs arose in the context of pervasive economic decline and urban decay. To gain access to external funding, state officials had to reconstitute the city as a site worthy of transnational interest and donor support. This involved shaping the older section of the capital into a distinctive collective artifact (“Stone Town”), the cultural property of a collective subject, the “Zanzibari people.” Early on in the process, the Chinese master planners formulated this emergent position quite succinctly: “The Stone Town is a famous historic city in East
Africa, a precious historical and cultural heritage of the Zanzibar people and also an attraction to the foreign tourists” (Qian and the Chinese City Planning Team 1982:23–24). There are multiple ironies here. The Chinese planners, along with other expatriate experts, had little contact with the “Zanzibari people,” a practice in keeping with socialist policies of centralized control and the tenets of modernist master planning. They did not recognize that urban residents had very different relations to the city’s history. Neither did the planning mission include any historical or ethnographic component; they mostly relied on material supplied by official contacts in the relevant ministries. Hence, they remained unaware that Stone Town simply did not exist at the time as a proper name or as a distinct area. Certainly the name Stone Town was used during the colonial period in an array of British documents, but the area’s boundaries were never stable or fixed. In any case, the English term never had much popular currency. After the 1964 revolution, Stone Town disappeared from the official lexicon. The Kiswahili name, Mji Mkongwe, was rarely used, and instead officials spoke of maeneo ya nyumba za mawe (areas of stone houses) or nyumba kongwe (old or outdated houses), but these were found throughout the entire city, not just in what is now considered Stone Town. Local neighborhood names (Shangani, Baghani, or Mkunazini) predominated, or people would refer to mjini (downtown). Stone Town was not in popular use; indeed, it was only in the mid-1980s, when conservation began to take off, that the area defined by this name started to take shape.

There were compelling reasons for the local state to present itself as the sole representative of the Zanzibari people, as an expression of their collective will, and as a guardian of their cultural heritage. This posture was an almost effortless outgrowth of revolutionary ideology. The period leading up to the revolution was one of intensified racial strife, and the uprising itself had involved considerable levels of violence among Zanzibaris of African, Arab, and Indian descent (Burgess 2001; Clayton 1981; Lofchie 1965). The revolution, which portrayed itself as the popular overcoming of colonial racial and class divisions, had in many instances intensified precisely those differences—a fact that the state was anxious to downplay or dismiss. Following the revolution, Zanzibar merged with mainland Tanganyika to form the United Republic of Tanzania. In Zanzibar, concerns about the lack of popular consultation over the union (combined with dismay over a perceived loss of sovereignty) have simmered ever since. These suspicions intensified following the merger of the island and mainland political parties in 1977 to form the sole ruling party Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM). The Zanzibar government continued to have its own nominal domain in the isles, but many islanders viewed mainland forces as hegemonic and controlling. At times these tensions have been construed in quite pointed terms: between island and mainland, Muslim and Christian, Arab and African, and Zanzibar and Tanganyika—ultimately threatening to challenge the stability of the union as well as Tanzania’s reputation for maintaining civil order.

The local state sought to use conservation as a means of addressing quite diverse constituencies. By painting itself as a sovereign force seeking to protect
and preserve the unique cultural heritage of the Zanzibari people, the regime could shore up its internal legitimacy while papering over a panoply of very real differences. At the same time, it could use conservation as a means of gaining direct access to external aid, circumventing the union government, and extending its reach and authority. In addition, Zanzibari authorities had to portray themselves as guardians of collective cultural property if they had any hope of gaining donor support and becoming the main conduit for aid and investment. If local officials were regarded as unrepresentative, particularistic, or partisan, external agencies would deny them access to cultural development funding. As time went on, the state increasingly singled out the older section of the city and represented it in reified terms. By treating the city as a historic asset that could serve as the basis for a new tourist economy, the Zanzibari government sought to leverage space and culture to transform Stone Town into a global attraction.

Collective remembrance, group identity, and reified culture also played a significant role in the practice of outside conservationists. Most were motivated by the essentially aesthetic and antiquarian impulses common in preservation and heritage campaigns. Animated precisely by the same nostalgic sensibilities that once gave shape to salvage or museum anthropology, they understood the past in terms of identifying significant monuments, reifying urban history, and severing the built fabric of the city from the social context that produced it. Consultants largely construed Stone Town as a zone of tradition, a survival from an earlier time that needed to be protected from what they identified as “ill-conceived modern developments”—building conversions, air conditioners, garish signs, and other innovations fostered to cater to the tourist market (Walls and Crispe 1991). Reified distinctions between tradition and modernity made it all too easy to overlook the fact that the “historic city” of Zanzibar was itself the product of the thoroughly modern forces of merchant capitalism and colonialism that had once sparked urban transformation, just as tourist redevelopment was doing now. As Stone Town was being transformed from a lived space to a phantasmic one, the colonial nostalgia of the developers was an instigating factor spurring counternostalgias among the dispossessed.

“Something out of this World”: Conjuring Arabian Nights and other Sites of Orientalist Desire

Throughout the 1980s, when Stone Town was being constituted as a site for transnational development and aid, local authorities and outside experts were engaged in an intricate pas de deux. Their success in garnering support and investment hinged on portraying the city in the most compelling light—as a stunning and irreplaceable treasure, the cultural repository of a people’s history and heritage, and a space emblematic of another moment in time. Zanzibari officials were to provide historical or anthropological data while the consultants would supply insight into the potential attractions of Stone Town to Western audiences as well as offering
advice about possible donors, grant writing, and the bureaucratic intricacies of the aid process. The documentary record surrounding this conservation effort is like an echo chamber: images in one report are reproduced in others, taking on the guise of established fact through their multiple iterations.

The terms of this discourse became increasingly exoticized and orientalizing. The chief Zanzibari town planner, who had started his career under British colonial rule, described Stone Town as a “unique Historic City” and an architectural gem “with streets of Arabian night charm.”16 The Chinese team subsequently embraced these terms, approvingly citing the “soaring minarets, narrow and tortuous streets” and other potential tourist attractions.17 The first Western planners to arrive, sponsored by UN Habitat, stressed many of the same themes in their initial conservation master plan: “Stone Town,” the external consultants stated, was a “unique tourist attraction—an Arab casbah with a colorful past. . . . The very name of Zanzibar evokes images of an exotic life in one of the major spice islands of the world” (LaNier et al. 1983:10). Zanzibar’s position as a “major spice island,” of course, was already in eclipse at the very moment it was being evoked. Throughout the colonial period—both Omani and British—the clove economy was central to the wealth and value of the isles. But with global restructuring under late capitalism, Zanzibar’s role as a primary producer of commodities was displaced by its image as such, as actual production gave way to mere signs: spice tours substituted for the spice trade, with the allure of tourism becoming the only asset in town.18

A decade later, with the marketing of the city in full sway, the Tourist Task Force of the Revolutionary Government took this phantasmic imagery up to an entirely new level. In its revised edition of the colonial-era Guide to Zanzibar, the task force began with a poetic flourish: “A land that fulfils dreams: For over two centuries now, Zanzibar has evoked to the world the magic of ‘A Thousand and One Nights’” (Zanzibar Tourist Task Force 1993:1). The historic “original” that allegedly grounds these orientalist tropes must in actuality be produced “after the fact”; it exists only in image form, literally the “stuff of dreams.” Speaking of Stone Town as a “living history,” the guide continues, “The architecture, including that of mosques, churches and Hindu temples, is fascinating. A visit to the Hammamani baths opens a window to the luxurious life of nineteenth century royalty and their famed harem. The hanging balconies separated by arm’s length streets are something out of this world” (1993:3). Maps and guides were supplemented by glossy productions such as the coffee-table book Historical Zanzibar: Romance of the Ages for sale in local gift shops, which starts out on a similar note:

Zanzibar! The very name conjures up the romance of the ages....Zanguebar, the land of the Zanj (blacks), was one of the marvels of the East. The fantasies about a far-off island paradise, where myths of elephants’ tusks and aromatic spices, oriental princesses and African slaves were strangely intertwined, were the stuff on which stories of Sindbad the Sailor were based. . . . To this heritage Zanzibar has added its own romance from [when] it reached its prime in the nineteenth century....Through its portals passed not only slaves, spices and ivory, but also missionaries, explorers
and conquerors. Harems, palace intrigues and the elopement of a Zanzibari princess to Europe refurbished the romantic image of Zanzibar. [Sheriff 1995b:6]

In a competitive market, Zanzibari officials and entrepreneurs came to understand all too well the need to distinguish the isles from a thousand other sun-and-sea destinations. Tourism as a development strategy depends on intensified flows of capital, images, and people; under these globalizing conditions, success ironically hinges on making places seem intensely local and unique. In this production of locality, culture serves as the essential supplement, a brand of distinctiveness and authenticity (Bruner 1996, 2001; Desmond 1999; Judd 1999). Travel writers and press accounts endlessly picked up and replayed the same tropes, starting with the name itself: “Zanzibar is one of those magical, mysterious African names, on a par with Timbuktu, that conjures up images of sultans, harems and expensive spices” (Hart 1997:5; see also Paxton and Paxton 2002; Sabados 2002; Stewart 1996). Endowing Zanzibar with magic and allure consistently involved likening it to other spaces of the Western imagination—Timbuktu and Babylon, of course, but others figured as well: Zanzibar was the “Venice of Africa,” or “the Casablanca of our day,” complete with gin soaked and malarial expatriates straight out of a Graham Greene novel (Hart 1997; Stewart 1996:12). This mythic marketing even extended to more fabulous outposts of Western literary invention: “Zanzibar is the capital of Exotica; located somewhere in the imagination between Ruritania and Narnia. A mythical land with a magical name, where carpets fly and Arabian knights rule with the swish of a silver scimitar” (Younge 1997:76).

Many of the tropes identified by Edward Said (1978) as defining orientalism flourished in the popular press. Indeed, as Said argued, the recursivity and endless repetition of orientalist images is one of the primary means by which they take on the guise of being “really real.” Zanzibar was described as “ancient,” “timeless,” or “a step back in time” (Taylor 1999:1). Shadowy courtyards, secrets, and stolen glimpses came in for prominent mention. Oriental despotism and sensuality seemed not far distant: “In the streets one still finds men in flowing robes and women in veils. In tall, shuttered rooms overlooking the sea there are still the clan loyalties, the whispered plots, the Byzantine intrigues of the harem” (Stewart 1996:12). Multiple strands of orientalist discourse came together to create a narrative that was both gendered and insistently sexualized. Timothy Mitchell (1988) has discussed the way that European travelers in 19th-century Cairo were confined by the city, unable to readily grasp its form or obtain a commanding point of view. Represented as an enigma, the urban milieu simultaneously frustrated and fascinated the gaze of (mostly male) outsiders. As with Zanzibar much later, the street layout was represented as a “maze” or “labyrinth,” constructing the Orient as a space of secrets and hidden depths. The “pleasures” of sightseeing were infused with the furtive logic of the voyeur, drawing symbolic parallels between the city and its veiled women. As one writer described his arrival in Stone Town, “Through carved doorways you could catch brief glimpses of courtyards
festooned with washing. Dark figures gathered around fires. Above, in the top stories of the houses, veiled women with kohl-darkened eyes stared down over latticed balustrades” (Dalrymple 1995:118). With its intricate street pattern and secluded inner spaces, Mji Mkongwe was depicted as refusing to give up its secrets too easily. As with veiled women, the stone exteriors of structures were said to simultaneously attract and resist the gaze of outsiders, offering only occasional hints of what lay within. This fascination with interiority neatly intersected with the figure of the harem, linking the gaze to fantasies of penetration and possession (Alloula 1986). The atmosphere was “intoxicating,” menacing, and enticing all at once:

It is the women of Zanzibar who make the greatest impression. Winding their silent way through these forbidding passageways in long black robes that cover them from head to toe, they present a picture that is straight out of 1001 Nights. Even the fashionable platform sandals that peek out from underneath their hems are not unlike those that might have been worn by Scheherezade herself. The effect—the enticing and faintly menacing labyrinth of decaying buildings, the smell of exotic spices, the unfamiliar sound of the Swahili language, the mysterious robed women, the feeling that at any moment you might come around a corner and be confronted by Ali Baba, or a slave trader, or a sultan, or a genie—was intoxicating. Zanzibar is one of those rare and elemental places, first glimpsed long ago in some fantastic, half-forgotten dream. But it was for real, and now we had found it at last. [Stuemner 2000:L5]

Conquest—imperial and otherwise—was also a dominant theme in this discourse. In the words of an English correspondent: “An empire was hardly worth the name if Zanzibar was not included as a conquest on the Imperial bedpost. Persians and Portuguese, Indians and Arabs all took turns” (Calder 1996: 17). Another opined: “Echoes of empire whisper in the labyrinth within narrow streets and alleys of Stone Town, the capital of coral limestone crowding around a harbour filled with sailing dhows that foster an image of timelessness” (Bell 2003:30). But despite talk of timelessness, historical references played a crucial role in the marketing of Zanzibar. This history was highly selective, playing on the romantic aura of Zanzibar’s name in a global imaginary, embroidering on primarily 19th-century materials. A quite narrow range of themes occurs again and again—intrepid English explorers (Burton, Livingstone, and Stanley), Arab sultans with their harems, Indian bazaars filled with spices and ivory: the Victorian age on the periphery is cast in the most appealing light. The emphasis on 19th-century exotica crowds out any mention of the plantation economy or colonial relations that were sufficiently agonized to produce a revolution of considerable violence. The reality of the slave trade was rarely mentioned other than as a romanticized dimension of Zanzibar’s exotic past.

The “Zanzibar” produced and targeted to the tourist market was by no means pure fantasy—even if, in some sense, it seemed more and more detached from the social realities of the lives of most Zanzibaris. Indeed, over the course of the 1990s, this imagery increasingly took on material form, embedded and embodied in the urban landscape of Stone Town. As liberalization took off, a range of entrepreneurs
and investors moved in to capture this emerging market and capitalize on orientalist exotica, lavishly restoring hotels, restaurants, and cafés with all the signs and style of 19th-century Arab royalty or Indian merchant-princes (see Figure 2). The historical specificity of the colonial period itself was left far behind, as the touristic production of the past was animated by a distinctly phantasmic logic, evoking the Orient as an object of Western desire (Alloula 1986; Ivy 1995). From the Aga Khan’s Serena Inn, to the Dhow Palace, Tembo Hotel, and other high-end boutique resorts, many of the same design elements predominated. The authors of Safari Style describe one refurbished emporium as “magical, combining Arab exoticism and colonial grandeur,” while another is an “Arabian fantasy” that strives to create a “mood of romantic sensuality” (Beddow and Burns 1998:175, 185). Numerous buildings and shops that once catered to locals have been converted to serve the tourist market. A new market in “antiques” opened up, as dealers scoured the countryside for goods that were not long ago the stuff of everyday life—things people kept and maintained because nothing else was available or affordable: 19th-century Ansonia clocks from Brooklyn, carved doors, inlaid beds, intricately decorated chests (makasha), hand-painted tiles, brass studs, coffeepots, and other newly precious objets (see Figure 3).

**Locating Longing and Loss in Zanzibar**

Conservation spawned a series of contradictions that could not be neatly contained. The state, for example, adopted strategies for development that effectively
undercut its claim to serve as a guardian of local heritage. The city had to be saved, officials asserted, because of its cultural and social significance for indigenes; and yet in practice the only way to “restore” the city was to render old buildings profitable, displacing local residents and transforming everyday spaces into capital assets. Western consultants vowed that the state could serve all interests—marketing the city to investors and “high class” tourists while simultaneously protecting indigenes. To achieve this balance would have been difficult under any circumstances, but in practice little effort was expended to help those who were displaced. Local residents, especially poor tenants who had been given low-cost housing in confiscated structures in Mji Mkongwe during the revolution and who were now confronting privatization with fixed incomes and few political connections, increasingly found themselves holding the short end of the stick.

For their part, outside consultants and conservationists were forced to confront a related conundrum of their own making. From the outset, they vigorously advocated privatization and open markets as the means to achieve urban regeneration. However, they failed to anticipate the wild capitalism that would result. Conservationists never fully thought through the implications of a truly “free” market—one in which new owners of old structures might feel free to ignore preservation guidelines and remake or destroy social or cultural monuments in the interest of maximizing private profit. The external planners advocated policies that ultimately came back to haunt them, as rampant development seemed to overwhelm restoration and economic renewal came at a cost: a crisis in the public sector.
precipitated by following neoliberal prescriptions to the letter. The revolutionary government had adopted economic liberalization to a startling degree, and its capacity to control urban affairs shrank dramatically as a direct result. As tourism grew tenfold in less than eight years, Zanzibaris with access to capital and external investors sought to capitalize on the boom with a vengeance. The government was almost wholly dependent on private capital and external donors for support; it had little capacity to regulate these forces, even if it had the will to do so.

State attempts to foster collective memory through conservation did strike a chord with some Zanzibaris. For instance, official claims to protect cultural patrimony intersected quite neatly with certain strands of Zanzibari nationalist belief about the uniqueness of coastal society and its inherent superiority over the mainland. Invoking the 19th century might bring the exotic and erotic into conjuncture for Western tourists, but for some Zanzibaris such images suggested quite a different picture: a time when Zanzibar was at the height of its power and prominence, a cosmopolitan center of commerce and culture that ruled over a far-flung empire. Elite Zanzibari collectors, aesthetes, and antiquarians similarly responded to the luster of bygone days, as did a few sympathizers with the ancien regime—partisans of the old order who saw Zanzibar as the pinnacle of an Arab–Persian civilization that had been tragically swept aside by a “rag-tag” African revolution.

However, both conservation efforts and the new capitalist economy were almost exclusively top-down affairs, from which many urban residents felt excluded. The divided nature of Zanzibar, the visions and spaces carved out for tourist consumption, as opposed to the daily experience of most local residents, correlated with a dual economy marked by the currency that one could command—U.S. dollars or Tanzanian shillings. Those Zanzibaris and outsiders who possessed dollar-producing assets could indeed turn a nifty profit—anything from well-placed shops to exclusive hotels or private islands with “romantic” bungalows going for $500 a night. However, the vast majority of Zanzibaris had little or no chance of gaining access to the stability of “hard” currency: they were locked within a stagnant local economy in which steady inflation was diminishing the purchasing power of their already low wages, making it increasingly difficult simply to get by.

Ultimately these disjunctures and divisions were mirrored in the physical geography of the city. Economic restructuring had produced benefits that were quite narrowly spread. Investment and rehabilitation worked in a highly targeted way, creating restored sites that generated significant profits for their owners while the rest of the city was left to decay. Worse yet, the boom took off while social services continued their steep decline. The “fruits of the revolution,” as they were once called, were increasingly allowed to wither away. Private doctors opened specialized clinics, but few Zanzibaris could afford their services. Medicines abounded on the shelves of new pharmacies but at prices that placed them well beyond reach. At the public hospital, health care was still nominally free, but few drugs were available. To obtain an operation, patients had to supply their own sutures, surgical gloves, and other essentials. Education was nominally free, but schools
lacked desks or chairs, not to mention educational materials. Teachers, like other civil servants, were often absent from their jobs, seeking additional sources of income from second jobs or private tutoring. Renovated hotels were springing up throughout Stone Town, but most public infrastructure remained in a perilous state, with chronic shortages of electricity, overflowing drains, flooded streets, and insufficient water (see Figure 4).

This context of social and economic transformation is where we must seek to understand the multiple strands of nostalgia circulating in contemporary Zanzibar. Some expressions of nostalgia were of the garden-variety sort—in a sense, both routine and retrograde. Among members of the former urban elite or returned exiles one often heard how sweet life was before the revolution. These sorts of narratives, typical of postrevolutionary contexts, generally focused on the damage wrought to a cultivated and civilized society by the “barbarians at the gate.” Dalrymple quotes a classic example:

In a café near the seafront I chatted with Harun bin Nu’man, a distant relative of the old ruling family. “In the old days everything was much better,” he said as he sipped mint tea. “The streets were so clean: at the crack of dawn the sweepers would be out, so that by the time you got up, everything would be sparkling. And the manners! The court set the tone, and everyone would try to keep up. Twice a day the old sultan used to ride through the town in his red Rolls-Royce, and everyone would salute. We had so much pomp and ceremony, and everyone was part of it. Now all that has gone. And as for the old palaces, the squatters who occupied them don’t mend the windows, and
they cook their food on the carved wooden surfaces. They are destroying our heritage.”

[1995:127]

Although the old elites had been scattered by the revolution and were too few in number to play a decisive role in contemporary Stone Town, this sensibility is still expressed by Zanzibaris of advanced age looking back to the days of their youth. In Baghani, one of the older sections of town, I spoke over tea one day with the aged scion of an influential Arab clan. As the glow of the late afternoon sun filled the living room of the house his grandfather had built, he lingered over the names and places of his youth, most now long forgotten, sighed and shook his head: “Zanzibar was the paradise of East Africa,” he repeated many times as we conversed, lamenting the demise of a city that had once been _cosmopolitan sana_ (very cosmopolitan).

However, these nostalgic reflections were in no way restricted to the elderly and the former elite. Fatuma, a woman who participated in the revolution, for example, was particularly indignant regarding recent incursions on public space. As we talked, she complained that some urban gardens were being taken over by private interests while others lay littered and dirty. Not so long before, she alleged, such things would have been unthinkable. She related an anecdote about the former president, who passed through Jamhuri (Republic) Gardens in the late 1980s and saw a new foundation being laid there. He asked an aide what was going on and was informed that the space had been sold to a private entrepreneur to start a food kiosk. “‘That is impossible,’ he angrily replied, ‘this is a garden for the people to come to, not the property of one person.’ The foundation was razed as a result,” she said, and the gardens restored. “That is what used to happen in the past,” she went on, “when things weren’t ruled by greed and haphazard building.” The eyes of this revolutionary positively lit up when she recalled the public spaces of her youth during the colonial period—Victoria Gardens with its ayahs and children in prams, where she went to play with her closest female friends (_mashoga_); the weekly concerts by the Sultan’s Police Band in Forodhani Bandstand or in the park between the sea and the English Club. “It was a time when procedures existed, discipline was strong, the laws were followed, and people lived with a great deal of neighborliness,” she concluded (interview with Fatuma Amina Idris, June 23, 1995).

As we can see with Fatuma’s abrupt shift from one mode of nostalgia to another, these discourses were informed by a very complex and fluid sense of temporality, disrupting any simple binary relation between past and present. Both the revolutionary and colonial periods could be variously invoked as urban Zanzibaris gave voice to a diverse array of longings. As in Fatuma’s case, historical oppositions between these periods could dissolve as an informant shifted easily back and forth between them, seeking to draw diverse points of contrast. In broad terms, colonialism was deployed as a figure to evoke images of economic bounty, the rule of law, a well-managed state, and a graciously maintained city. The revolution, by contrast, stood for stability, broad provisions of social welfare, discipline, and
basic rights to housing, health, work, and wages. The revolution, although brief in duration (20 years vs. about 75 for colonial rule), was both closer in time and more accessible to popular memory. Yet in some sense it was harder to burnish this period with a positive glow. A far greater proportion of urban residents had directly experienced the revolution (or knew others who had), and in the early 1980s, it was widely glossed in popular discourse as a time of authoritarian politics, isolation, and economic decline. Committed revolutionaries and diehard members of the ruling party (albeit a minority) were more likely to embrace the revolution in an unqualified way, but ordinary residents of Mji Mkongwe by and large were much more disenchanted. Indeed, the experience of socialism as a time of stagnation, political constraint, and urban decay led many Zanzibaris to welcome liberalization with open arms. However, the unrestrained capitalism of the 1990s prompted a sudden reappraisal of the revolution in popular memory. Even some Zanzibaris who had been dispossessed by the revolution began to recast that time in a more positive light—as a period of difficulty and unfreedom, yes, but also of order, discipline, and state concern for watu wadogo (the little people) or wanyonge (the oppressed).

I was most struck by the upsurge of nostalgic desire among those born well after the revolution, those of African descent, people lacking in privilege or position: small traders, teachers or other public sector workers, and under- or unemployed youth. Initially, many urban Zanzibaris had high expectations for the “goods” that economic and political liberalization might bring, but these hopes, as time went on, went largely unrealized. Neoliberal policy, as elsewhere in Africa, had fostered an unrestrained capitalism in which the rich seemingly got richer and the poor were simply shut out. As a local journalist trenchantly observed, “Under the Ujamaa era everything depended on the generosity of the state. But with the dawn of free market economy, it is everybody for himself” (Kilimwiko 1995:3). In the streets the initials of the ruling revolutionary party, CCM, were widely said to stand for “Chakua Chako Mapema,” an ethic for the age that can be translated as “get yours while you can.” A building inspector I knew quietly commented one evening that he was on the verge of quitting. Dealing every day with the passions unleashed by the recent land grab had left him feeling burned out. Watching neighbors come to blows and families falling out, he did not know if he could take it longer: “The spirit of people has changed now; land is property” (interview with Masud Salum Mohamed, December 15, 1993). A day laborer who had built his house for 3,000 shillings in 1972 snorted bitterly when I naively asked if he could do the same today. “Where man [Wapi, bwana]?” he expostulated. “A single bag of cement will cost you 4,000 shillings”—slightly less than what he might earn in a week. You would need at least 400,000 to 500,000 shillings, he said, to even begin thinking about building a very modest place on the outskirts of town (interview with Mzee Mkondo, May 27, 1995).

In mid-1995, I was hanging out with some younger men at their baraza, which simultaneously designates a group, a forum for debate, and the site where regular
discussion takes place. Evaluating the lack of progress in official conservation efforts, Said observed, “It is not easy to make the city return to how it was in the past.” One of his companions, Hassan, readily agreed, emphasizing the contrast between then and now with a derisive quip: “The difference is huge. In the past there was faith, now there’s cocaine” (Said Omari and Hassan Ali, collective interview with the baraza of Sheikh Khalidi, July 10, 1995). Throughout my fieldwork, the decline of public services was widely lamented—streets, schools, and health care. The colonial-era hospital, a shopkeeper told me, existed now in name only: “There is no medicine there; there are no doctors. People are just brought there to die” (interview with Ali Salim, November 23, 1994).

Shortly afterward, I went to Mnazi Mmoja Hospital (formerly V. I. Lenin) to visit a friend who was sick. Waiting in the courtyard of one of the clinics with his son, I remarked on the view—open to the sea, lots of light and fresh air. “Yes,” he sardonically agreed, “and that is about all you get. No medicines, no treatment, no food. But plenty of light and air” (interview with Seif Ahmed Soud, January 27, 1995). A retired teacher I knew just shook his head with dismay. Things were so bad, he said, that the hundred shilling note was becoming the lowest unit of currency—“Forget about one-shilling coins or cents; they’re gone for good. And what do you get for a hundred shillings? Not much. Two juices. A slice of cassava. A few cups of coffee.” What used to be a substantial sum was now just pocket change. “Life is becoming more and more difficult now,” he sighed wearily. “The cost of living skyrackets while wages are falling. Zanzibar is unique: here life just becomes harder and harder, it is unlike the West and the rest of Africa. In terms of troubles, it is unique” (interview with Mwalimu Babu Karima, June 21, 1995).

But in fact, this situation is anything but unique: as Ferguson has shown in the context of the Copperbelt, far too many Africans are experiencing the “new economy” as a kind of abjection—simultaneously being cast down and cast out, feeling both excluded and expelled from the promise of modernity (1999:236). One morning I sat with Salma Hasani in her family’s house in Mkunazini, asking about the city of her youth. “In those days, it was,” she began and then abruptly broke off, lost in thought. After a moment, she resumed: “Everything was inexpensive, and at work, every person had their own task to do. I don’t remember that things were disordered, everything expensive like right now, a hard life, everything a problem. Even if you have two or three thousand shillings, it’s not enough. During Ramadan, if you spend three thousand shillings a day, it doesn’t do a thing. Just for me and my children” (interview with Salma Hasani, March 10, 1995). This in a time, remember, when the minimum wage stood at 5,000 shillings for an entire month.

Conclusion

These sorts of discourses give powerful testimony to the experience of economic and social dislocation. They are best understood as reflections on and responses to novel conditions—the unstable currencies and values of the present,
the abandonment of the socialist order and sudden collapse of public services, the abrupt opening of the islands to transnational capital and mass tourism, and the dramatic alterations in the built landscape of the city. During my fieldwork, the English term speedy began to crop up in Kiswahili as a means of articulating what was going on. As a surveyor put it to me, “Right now, everyone is in a rush for life. These days it’s more speedy. To meet global conditions, it is necessary that the speed is great, but people are struggling just to get by” (interview with Mohamed Issa Rashidi, June 29, 1995). These popular nostalgias all reconstruct the past as a means of establishing a point of critique in the present, calling to judgment the failures of the state and the mysteries of the market. If we just dismiss them as deluded or reactionary, we run the risk of ignoring the way in which they create a space of possibility for a politics that cannot be conducted in other forms or by other means.

If nostalgia is a cultural practice that hinges on position and perspective, it should be seen as part of a social imaginary—that is, as expressive and creative activity grounded in the dynamics of everyday life. Analyzing nostalgia in context, locating it richly within the “landscape of the present,” seems a task especially well suited to ethnography. As an irreducibly plural phenomenon, nostalgia takes on very different forms and dimensions, engaging an array of social agents, interests, forces, and locations. The point of departure for any adequate ethnography of colonial nostalgia is to acknowledge this complicated landscape by carefully mapping a terrain of social difference and distinction. As anthropologists have long recognized, reflections on the past are inflected by multiple and shifting lines of power. These longings can be linked with all sorts of political projects, for good or for ill, depending on the context. And although we may not necessarily approve of the means deployed by nostalgic visions—the impatience with ambiguity, for example, or a reliance on absolutes or essences—that does not mean that we are justified in denying their political character. Whether popular expressions of nostalgia in Zanzibar will reach critical mass and go beyond pointed commentary or ironic critique is not clear. Regressive nostalgias, linked to the antiquarian sympathies of conservationists and the state, as well as the orientalist impulses of the tourist economy, may well remain hegemonic. However, much depends on how the struggle between these discrete forms of remembrance plays out, and we cannot hope to understand the social landscape of contemporary Zanzibar without fully appreciating the stakes involved.

As a potentially significant site for articulating social critique and protest, nostalgia has the capacity to conjoin space and time, placing them in a state of creative tension and mobilizing them for reciprocal comment and contrast. This is especially true in the context of the city. As Elizabeth Wilson observes, “To return to a city in which you used to live is—especially if the gap is a long one—to be made sharply aware of the passage of time, and the changing fabric of cities congeals that process of the passage of time in a way that is both concrete and somehow eerie or ghostly” (1997:128). We can grasp then why it is that nostalgia is crucially
informed by spatial restructuring and vice versa—urban conservation in Zanzibar, war devastation in Angola, or reconstruction in Berlin and Prague. Nostalgia is also uniquely capable of bridging gaps and crossing boundaries between public and private spheres. In the nostalgic domain, the personal is inherently political—and vice versa. Above all, sentiments of longing and loss can supply a critical framework that dynamically links intimate and individual domains to broader issues of political import, and it does so in ways that are not only meaningful to social actors but deeply moving to them as well.

Andreas Huyssen has suggested that the proliferation of memory discourses and practices across the globe is connected to a historical shift—the eclipse, that is, of the structure of temporality once associated with high modernity: a faith in progress, development, and an ultimate telos of history. We turn to the past, he argues, precisely to secure what the future can no longer supply. “Slowing down rather than speeding up, expanding the nature of public debate, trying to heal the wounds inflicted in the past, nurturing and expanding livable space rather than destroying it for the sake of some future promise, securing 'quality time'—these seem to be unmet cultural needs in a globalizing world” (Huyssen 2000:36–37). It is precisely this political terrain that colonial nostalgia in Zanzibar places on the agenda. Here as there, this is a landscape that cries out for critical engagement. In this respect, Huyssen does not hold out much hope—in fact he warns, “the past cannot give us what the future had failed to deliver.” On this point I would argue exactly the reverse. If the ethnography of colonial nostalgia in Zanzibar can tell us anything, it is this: the past provides precisely an imaginative resource—a realm rich in invention, critical in possibility—for people struggling with the present, hoping to secure what can no longer be found in the future.

Notes

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1. All names of informants used are pseudonyms.
2. In Thatcher’s Britain, there were the many manifestations of the “raj nostalgia mode” (Sharpe 1993:142) that Salman Rushdie (1991) first analyzed so well.
3. How these products or productions have influenced a broad public is by no means an unambiguous question. Scholars have focused largely on ideological critique rather than ethnographic research on reception or consumption. Even during the heyday of high
imperialism, as Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper (1997:6) note, “it is not clear that the idea of ruling an empire captivated European publics for more than brief periods or that a coherent set of agendas and strategies for rule was convincing to a broad metropolitan population.”

4. Although the different forms of nostalgia that I am designating colonial and imperial exist in tension, they intersect in quite powerful ways—not least, as we can see in Zanzibar, in former colonial sites refashioned as spaces for Western tourism. The marketing of such sites draws on and extends older cultural mythologies about Africa embodied in travel narratives, novels, popular films, and expatriate memoirs. Such imagery suffuses and supports the desire to see the “real” Africa. As Michael Maren describes his arrival in Kenya as a Peace Corps volunteer in the late 1970s,

A wave of nostalgia for colonialism was beginning to surface among expatriates and even among some Africans. This nostalgia played perfectly into my “experience” with Africa, shaped by films like *Khartoum, Beau Geste, The African Queen, Casablanca*, and a selection of Tarzan movies. These images endured despite my having read Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and other African thinkers. We arrived in Nairobi to find that our white skin was an immediate passport to the best clubs and restaurants in town. We soon learned the joys of drinking on the verandah of the Norfolk Hotel, or of visiting game lodges in Kenya’s national parks. The lure of the hedonistic colonial lifestyle became even more seductive when we were sent out beyond the metropolis to the towns in the hinterland. There we found refuge in the colonial sports clubs with their billiard tables, dart boards, and squash courts that the servants of the Crown had carved out of the wilderness. [1997:4–5]

5. The tidal creek that separated the western peninsula from Ng’ambo was filled in during the 1950s. Hence today Stone Town and “the other side” are contiguous, joined by Creek Road, even as conservation programs have sought to restore old boundaries, making them seem separate and distinct.

6. The charismatic first president Abeid Amani Karume explicitly associated “mud huts” with colonial conditions of bondage. He initiated an ambitious program of reconstruction in Ng’ambo, on the grounds that “a mud hut, however well constructed, cannot possibly compare with a modern flat. . . . A person who lives in a miserable ramshackle hut rather than a modern flat cannot truly be said to be free.” Most of the Ng’ambo dwellings razed to make way for public housing, however, were neither “miserable,” “ramshackle,” nor even “mud huts.” But this did not stop Karume from uncritically embracing an ideology of modernization, and the work went ahead as planned. See Zanzibar National Archives (ZNA): BA 68/15, “Address of His Excellency the First Vice-President of Tanzania and President of the Afro-Shirazi Party, the Hon. Sk. Abeid Amani Karume, at Maisara Ground, 12 January 1969,” pp. 4–6.

7. Ujamaa designates the form of African socialism most closely associated with Julius Nyerere and Tanzania from the 1960s until the mid 1980s.

8. After repeated attempts to gain recognition, the “Stone Town” of Zanzibar was eventually inscribed in the World Heritage List in 2000. For detail on the listing, go to http://whc.unesco.org/nwhc/pages/doc/mainf3.htm, and search alphabetically under the United Republic of Tanzania.

9. Zanzibar was caught up in Cold War rivalries from the earliest days of the revolution, when it was characterized in Western press reports as the “Cuba of the Indian Ocean.” Although officially nonaligned, the isles were increasingly linked with the socialist bloc as the 1960s progressed. Western aid and engagement were mostly withdrawn. The Soviet Union supplied military aid and advisers while the East Germans provided security training and housing assistance. The Chinese were also involved from an early stage: following the state visit of Chou En-lai in June 1965, they offered cash grants, rice, and medical personnel
to support V. I. Lenin hospital as gestures of socialist solidarity. In the 1970s, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) provided major technical and material assistance to the Union government in order to construct the TAZARA railway. It is in this context that Zanzibar approached the PRC government for help with urban planning in the late 1970s, requesting a team of experts to provide a new master plan for the city.

10. If a sense of linear historical time is a precondition for nostalgia, this in no way determines what specific points in history get seized upon as subjects of nostalgic reverie. In the case of Zanzibar, precolonial, colonial, and revolutionary moments are all equally plausible as candidates for nostalgic reflection, but in practice mostly the colonial and the revolutionary periods were invoked. The precolonial period was too remote and lacking in contrasting detail and was rarely mentioned by my Zanzibari interlocutors.

11. There are good historical reasons why many Zanzibaris have these idealized views of colonialism. Since the mid-1960s, history proper has not been taught as a subject in Zanzibari schools. During the early revolution it was dangerous to possess historical papers and documents associated with the ancien régime, so private archives and family papers were abandoned, seized, or destroyed. Local and external access to state archives was sharply curtailed; from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s little historical or ethnographic research was allowed. Hence detailed documentary sources have not played any significant role in shaping Zanzibaris’ views of the past.

12. In the archival record, frequent colonial-era complaints about conditions in the city were joined by occasional expressions of nostalgia—especially by colonial officers retired to gray old England, longing for their former days in the sun. For a poetic (if maudlin) example of “the nostalgia felt after retirement by so many of those who have had the good fortune to serve in Zanzibar,” see “The M’nazi Mnmoja Road: A Reverie by the Man Who Has Come Home,” in John Houston Sinclair, “Senex Africanus,” n.d. [1955], Mss. 47, Royal Commonwealth Society, Cambridge University Library.


14. If nostalgia first designated a condition of acute homesickness, it later became intimately tied to the problem of melancholia, which Bryan Turner identifies as the “specific depression of intellectuals” (1987:147). Melancholy was seen as an outgrowth of self-awareness, an appropriate outlook for beings inclined to dwell on the passage of time, the fragility of things, the inevitability of decay, dissolution, and death (Turner 1994:117)—hence its eventual significance for romanticism.

15. I am indebted to one of the reviewers for Cultural Anthropology for supplying this critical insight.


19. As late as 1977, when the Seychelles was hosting 70,000 visitors a year, only 6,100 foreigners managed to reach Zanzibar (Qian and the Chinese City Planning Team 1982:57–58). The number of arrivals hovered slightly above or below 9,000 into the
mid-1980s and then took off sharply. In 1982, 8,967 non-Tanzanians came to the isles; in 1991, this figure had dramatically increased to 82,773 (Mwalim 1992). In the 1990s, high officials hoped to increase tourism numbers to over a million visitors annually, but the industry has suffered from repeated slumps in recent years. From the 1998 bombings of American embassies to the attack on the Israeli-owned hotel in neighboring Kenya in 2002, internal turmoil has intersected with external violence to keep the numbers of visitors down. In 2003, just as the high season was getting underway, the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, Norway, and Italy all warned their citizens about travel to Zanzibar, and fears of terrorism led to cancellations and high vacancy rates. In 2002, about 86,000 tourists came to Zanzibar, generating $600,000 a month in earnings. Although the government hoped to attract 100,000 visitors in 2003, the terrorism warnings instead led to a sharp drop. Through November 2003, fewer than 20,000 tourists had arrived, and earnings had declined by two-thirds. As of mid-2004, a recovery appeared to be underway, yet Zanzibaris involved in tourism were keenly aware that the industry remained highly vulnerable to any new travel warnings. For more on recent developments, see Yussuf 2004, Kanina 2003, Wax 2003, and Lacey 2002.

20. Interview with Abdullahi bin Mohamed al-Alawi, June 7, 1995. As one of my reviewers pointed out, comments such as these raise important questions about the kind of pragmatic “social work” performed by nostalgic utterances in particular contexts. For instance, one might suggest that these reflections were motivated by the desire of informants to establish links with a mzungu ethnographer associated with the West, if not the actual former colonial power. For a number of reasons, I do not believe this to be the case. If informants hoped to flatter or please me with nostalgia, they must have been disappointed by my response. My initial surprise and denial gave way to active debate and disagreement when I came across such remarks. Historical arguments and objections, however, did not serve to change many minds. My Zanzibari interlocutors steadfastly maintained their views despite any counterevidence I could cite. Also, these reflections were extremely widespread and not just produced for external consumption. Indeed nostalgic comments were often offered up in discussions among groups of Zanzibaris where I was largely incidental to the conversation. Most comments, as I indicate below, have less to do with the West and the past than the immediacy of the Zanzibari present: these are memory practices shaped by explicit concern with contemporary sociocultural, economic, and political conditions in the city.

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ENGAGING COLONIAL NOSTALGIA  245

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Zanzibar Tourist Task Force

ABSTRACT When contemporary Africans express nostalgia for the colonial past, how are we to make sense of such sentiments? Anthropologists have tended to ignore colonial nostalgia, reacting with dismissal or distaste. This article seeks
to account for this avoidance, exploring nostalgia as a crucial source for anthropology and a constitutive feature of Western modernity. Nostalgic sentiments of loss and longing are shaped by specific cultural concerns and struggles; like other forms of memory practice, these desires must be engaged with in ethnographic terms and located within the changing contours of a contested social landscape. In urban Zanzibar, I argue that colonial nostalgia has emerged in a postrevolutionary context and is best understood as a diverse set of responses to neoliberal policies of urban restructuring. [cities, social memory, neoliberalism, nostalgia, Zanzibar]