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# PROPERTY CONFISCATION IN THE ZANZIBAR REVOLUTION

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## Abstract

The literature on the Zanzibar Revolution highlights contested views of events leading up to a short period of violence in 1964. Other studies have followed the paths of those who fled the islands of Zanzibar in the aftermath of the revolution, many of whom lost property to government confiscations. How the confiscations impacted and still inform the relation of their previous owners to Zanzibar, however, has received rather little scholarly attention. This article introduces a dataset of georeferenced property confiscation orders, originally published in the *Zanzibar Gazettes* between 1964 and 1987. The data contribute to our understanding of the Zanzibar Revolution by showing that the temporal arc of the Revolution was decades long and that property confiscations went beyond urban houses in Stone Town and large plantations. Property confiscations, effected by revolutionary decree, persisted into the 1980s on both Pemba and Unguja islands. By bringing the data into conversation with family histories and previous literature on the aftermath of the revolution, this article illustrates the relevance of

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Revolutionary era property losses for questions of identity, belonging, desire for restitution, and ongoing development efforts.

WALKING THROUGH THE NARROW STREETS AND ALLEYWAYS OF ZANZIBAR city's historic Stone Town today, one encounters buildings in various states of decay and renovation—silent witnesses to a revolutionary past. The carved wooden doors and balconies evoke a layered cosmopolitan history. African, Arab, Asian, and European influences in the thriving trading port led to the recognition of 'Stone Town' by the UNESCO World Heritage Convention.<sup>1</sup> Yet many buildings are crumbling and near collapse, reminders of post-revolutionary confiscations that stripped families of property and, with it, a sense of home and belonging.<sup>2</sup> There are also an increasing number of freshly renovated buildings. Some of these buildings are part of government programmes to restore important historic sites,<sup>3</sup> others have been sold by the government to international investors who turned them into hotels to serve the growing tourism industry.<sup>4</sup> A third category of renovated buildings is those regained by owners who lost the property during the 1964 revolution. Ahmed is one such owner.<sup>5</sup> Sitting with him in his newly renovated house in Shangani, a neighbourhood in Stone Town, in December 2015, he reflected on the many years that it took him to get this property back. Most of his family's property was confiscated after the revolution. When his father and uncle were killed, the remainder of Ahmed's family moved to Oman, where he had a successful career in the civil service. After the political opening of Zanzibar in the mid-1980s, he became interested in regaining his family property in Zanzibar. It took 16 years and many visits to different ministries in Zanzibar to finally regain one house.

While the story of Ahmed's life is unique, he is not the only person who has been trying to regain confiscated properties in recent years. Some who were thwarted in their efforts decided to buy land and build new houses

1. The local population uses the term *mji* (town) or *mji mkongwe* (old town) for the old part of Zanzibar City. Nevertheless, over the past decades, and particularly in the context of the UNESCO World Heritage Application, 'Stone Town' has become the term generally used by tourists and international actors to refer to the old part of the city. See Abdul Sheriff, 'Contradictions in the heritagization of Zanzibar 'Stone Town'', in Burkhard Schnepel and Tansen Sen (eds), *Travelling pasts: The politics of cultural heritage in the Indian Ocean world* (Brill, Leiden, 2019), pp. 221–245.

2. Sheriff, 'Contradictions in the heritagization of Zanzibar 'Stone Town''. See also Garth Thomas Burgess, 'Cinema, bell bottoms, and miniskirts: Struggles over youth and citizenship in revolutionary Zanzibar', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, 2/3 (2002), pp. 287–313 on the effects of the 'official neglect' of Stone Town in the 1970s.

3. See, for example, the ongoing efforts of the Oman government through its Ministry of Heritage and Tourism to restore historic sites in Zanzibar related to Omani architectural heritage.

4. Sheriff, 'Contradictions in the heritagization of Zanzibar 'Stone Town''.

5. All names have been changed to grant anonymity to the research participants.

elsewhere when their requests were denied. But others are unwilling to give up their efforts to get family property back. Said, for example, whose family history is very similar to Ahmed's, has been writing letters to the Zanzibari government for years to ask for the return of family property. He has heard that the government is selling some of the confiscated properties to anyone who agrees to renovate the buildings—a thought that scares him as it might make it completely impossible for him to succeed.<sup>6</sup> The actions of both families reflect a continued sense of belonging to Zanzibar despite decades spent elsewhere. Belonging in this context can be understood as both membership in a group of 'Zanzibaris' and attachment to a certain territory.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars engage with the Zanzibar Revolution of January 1964 from a variety of different perspectives, frequently highlighting the contested views of the events.<sup>8</sup> To date, the property confiscations following the Revolution have often only been briefly mentioned in the literature, despite the clear importance of the confiscated properties to many families. More emphasis has been put on the 'time of politics' (*zama za siasa*), leading to the violence, as well as the subsequent coming into power of Abeid Karume, and the formation of the union between Zanzibar and Tanganyika.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, even though a number of studies have followed the paths of those who fled the islands of Zanzibar in the aftermath of the revolution, neither the effects of

6. Interview with Sandra F. Joireman, Muscat, Oman, March 2022.

7. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2020), discusses belonging in countries with colonial legacies as constructed by exclusion—by marking certain groups as not belonging or as threats to the body politic. In this instance, those who were expelled by the postcolonial state as a threat have both sustained a collective identity in the group from which they were expelled and are also seeking to re-establish limited territorial claims.

8. Roman Loimeier, 'Memories of revolution: Patterns of interpretation of the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar', in William Cunningham Bissell and Marie-Aude Fouéré (eds), *Social memory, silenced voices, and political struggle: Remembering the revolution in Zanzibar* (Mkuki na Nyota Publishers Ltd., Dar es Salaam, 2018), pp. 37–78; Said Barwani et al., *Unser Leben vor der Revolution und danach—Maisha yetu kable ya mapinduzi na baadaye* (Rüdiger Köppe, Cologne, 2003); Michael Lofchie, *Zanzibar: Background to revolution* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1965); Tibananande Luta Maliyamkono, *The political plight of Zanzibar* (TEMA Publishers, Dar es Salaam, 2000); Garth Andrew Myers, 'Narrative representations of revolutionary Zanzibar', *Journal of Historical Geography* 26, 3 (2000), pp. 429–448; Jonathon Glassman, 'Sorting out the tribes: The creation of racial identities in colonial Zanzibar's newspaper wars', *The Journal of African History* 41, 3 (2000), pp. 395–428; Anthony Clayton, *The Zanzibar revolution and its aftermath* (C. Hurst, London, 1981); Garth Thomas Burgess, *Race, revolution and the struggle for human rights in Zanzibar* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2009); and *The Zanzibar revolution and its aftermath* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2018).

9. Issa G. Shivji, *Pan-Africanism or pragmatism: Lessons of Tanganyika-Zanzibar union* (Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, Dar es Salaam, 2008); Jonathon Glassman 'Slower than a massacre: The multiple sources of racial thought in colonial Africa', *The American Historical Review* 109, 3 (2004), pp. 720–754; William Cunningham Bissell and Marie-Aude Fouéré, *Social memory, silenced voices, and political struggle: Remembering the revolution in Zanzibar* (Mkuki na Nyota Publishers Ltd., Dar es Salaam, 2018).

the revolution on their properties, nor their role in ongoing investments and building activities have been analysed in much detail.<sup>10</sup>

Against this background, we set out to introduce new data on property confiscations from confiscation orders published in the Zanzibar Gazettes between 1964 and 1987. We use this data to contribute to the historical understanding of the scope and scale of the Zanzibar Revolution as well as its impact on the identity of people who had their property confiscated. We use three different methods to arrive at our conclusions. We conducted oral histories with Omani–Zanzibaris in Oman and Zanzibar, as well as with Asian–Zanzibaris in Zanzibar and the UK. We accessed archived public records and used spatial analysis on a dataset we constructed out of the public records. By providing new data and insights on the number, location, and subjects of confiscations, we seek to complement previous work on the nature, impact, and timeline of the Zanzibar Revolution. Specifically, we note that property confiscations continued for decades after the revolution and that these confiscations occurred in urban and rural areas on both Pemba and Unguja Islands. This suggests a scope and scale to the economic impact of the revolution that was not previously obvious. These data complicate previous narratives around property confiscations that suggest a single causal narrative. It was not just houses in Zanzibar City, clove plantations, or the properties of Omani–Zanzibaris or South Asians that were taken. Rather, all of these things are true, suggesting a revolutionary history consistent with what we see in other conflicts in which violence is neither random nor purely ideological, but strategic and context-dependent, driven by government motives, local politics, and personal vendettas.<sup>11</sup>

This work reconceptualizes the Zanzibar Revolution as a protracted reordering of land and belonging that resonates in contemporary claims for restitution and in broader debates about property rights in post-conflict societies. As this case shows, often the accepted political narrative or the earliest interpretation of events crowd out alternative understandings of violent conflict. This empirical and methodological contribution offers new insights for scholars of African political history, the Indian Ocean world, and the moral economy of property loss.

10. See Akbar Keshodkar, 'Indian Ocean trade and emerging pathways of mobility in neoliberal Zanzibar', *The Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies* 6, 1 (2022), pp. 38–64 and Julia Verne and Detlef Müller-Mahn, 'We are part of Zanzibar—Translocal practices and imaginative geographies in contemporary Oman-Zanzibar relations', in Steffen Wippel (ed.), *Regionalizing Oman: Political, economic and social dynamics* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2013) for a few exceptions.

11. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil war* (Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, 2006).

*A brief history of property and land ownership in Zanzibar to the time of the revolution*

The history of Zanzibar is usually presented as one of interaction and exchange, leading to a globalized and cosmopolitan trading centre on the East African coast. After a thousand years of seaborne mobility between the Arabian Peninsula and Zanzibar, the defeat of the Portuguese army by the al-Ya'rubi dynasty from Oman marked the beginning of the first wave of official migration from the Arabian Peninsula to the island.<sup>12</sup> As William Cunningham Bissell has formulated it so well, 'trade and travel, movement and migration were central to its growth as an entrepot in the nineteenth century, as the island became a dynamic cultural and commercial nexus linking Africa to Asia, the Arab world, Europe, and America'.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the trade of diverse goods such as ivory, agricultural products, and slaves, clove production became a critical component of Zanzibar's capitalist economy. Endemic to the Moluccas, cloves are reported to have come to Zanzibar via the Mascarenes at the beginning of the nineteenth century, though the exact timing and circumstances remain unclear.<sup>14</sup> Economic gains from the caravan trade were soon invested in clove production, leading to the development of a large plantation economy that relied heavily on enslaved labour.<sup>15</sup>

When Said bin Sultan moved the capital of the Omani Sultanate from Muscat to Zanzibar in 1840, this was accompanied by increased migration and an expansion of territory to include all of the small islands within a 12-mile radius of Zanzibar's two main islands, Unguja and Pemba.<sup>16</sup> At that time, global demand for cloves was exceptionally high, prompting further Omani migration to Zanzibar to take advantage of opportunities for clove cultivation and trade. It was in this context that Zanzibar's first land law, the 1830 Muslim Land Law, was introduced. The law permitted individuals to claim ownership of land by being the first to cultivate it, although no formal titles or deeds were issued.<sup>17</sup> This law encouraged further Omani migration

12. Marc Valeri, 'Nation-building and communities in Oman since 1970: The Swahili-speaking Omani in search of identity', *African Affairs* 106, 424 (2007), pp. 479–496, p. 482.

13. William Cunningham Bissell, 'Casting a long shadow: Colonial categories, cultural identities, and cosmopolitan spaces in globalizing Africa', *African Identities*, 5 (2007), pp. 181–197, p. 183.

14. Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, spices & ivory in Zanzibar* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 1987), p. 50; Jack Turner, *Spice: The history of a temptation* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2004), p. 295.

15. Sarah K. Croucher, *Capitalism and cloves: An archaeology of plantation life on nineteenth-century Zanzibar* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2015), p. 21.

16. William Harold Ingrams, *Zanzibar: Its history and its people* (H. F. and G. Witherby, London, 1931).

17. Ibrahim F. Shao, *The political economy of land reforms in Zanzibar: Before and after the revolution* (Dar es Salaam University Press, Dar es Salaam, 1992), p. 7.

to Zanzibar. By the end of the Said regime in 1856, Zanzibar had become the world's largest clove producer.<sup>18</sup>

Zanzibar's capitalist economy supported many wealthy Omanis who became landlords on Unguja and Pemba, cultivating cloves, grains, and coconuts.<sup>19</sup> They lived alongside a community of South Asian merchants who supplied firms and capital that further supported this export-oriented economy.<sup>20</sup> Most South Asians migrated to Zanzibar from western India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a peak in the late 1940s.<sup>21</sup>

According to a survey of Zanzibar undertaken by the British in 1922, people classified as Arabs owned 69 percent of clove trees, those classified as Asians owned 9 percent, and Africans were in possession of 22 percent.<sup>22</sup> On Pemba, both Arabs and Africans owned 46 percent each, whereas Asians owned percent.<sup>23</sup> E. M. Dawson estimated that by 1888, about 60 percent of Zanzibar's clove plantations were mortgaged to Indian merchants, with indebted Arabs becoming tenants of absentee landlords and creditors.<sup>24</sup> Many Omani migrants who arrived in Zanzibar after 1900 were not wealthy; they sought employment and better economic prospects than those available in Oman.<sup>25</sup> This wave of migrants was colloquially known as *Manga* Arabs. Often lacking capital, education, and fluency in Swahili, they primarily worked as merchants or as labourers on plantations owned by more affluent Omani-Zanzibaris.<sup>26</sup>

On 1 July 1890, Zanzibar became a British protectorate. In line with Britain's policy of indirect rule, the Sultan retained a nominal position of power. Omani migration to Zanzibar continued during this period, although

18. Peter J. Martin, 'The Zanzibar clove industry', *Economic Botany* 45, 4 (1991), pp. 450–459.

19. Elisabeth McMahon, *Slavery and emancipation in Islamic East Africa: From honor to respectability* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013), p. 43.

20. Sheriff, *Slaves, spices & ivory in Zanzibar*, pp. 104–105; Gijsbert Oonk, 'South Asians in East Africa (1880–1920) with a particular focus on Zanzibar: Toward a historical explanation of economic success of a middlemen minority', *African and Asian Studies* 5, 1 (2006), pp. 57–90.

21. Akbar Keshodkar, 'Marriage as the means to preserve 'Asian-ness': The post-revolutionary experience of the Asians of Zanzibar', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45, 2 (2010), pp. 226–240; Lofchie, *Zanzibar: Background to revolution*; Sheriff, *Slaves, spices & ivory in Zanzibar*.

22. 'Arab' and 'African' were British census categories.

23. G. D. Kirsopp, *Memorandum on certain aspects of the Zanzibar clove industry* (Waterloo & Sons, Ltd., London, 1926); Martin, 'The Zanzibar clove industry'; Zanzibar Protectorate, *Report on the census of the population of Zanzibar Protectorate: Taken on the night of the 19th and 20th of March, 1958* (Government Printer, Zanzibar, 1960).

24. Eustace M. Dawson, *A note on agricultural indebtedness in the Zanzibar Protectorate* (Government Printer, Zanzibar, 1936); C.F. Strickland, *Report on co-operation and certain aspects of the economic condition of agriculture in Zanzibar* (Crown Agents for the Colonies, London, 1932).

25. Marc Valeri, 'Nation-building and communities in Oman since 1970', pp. 482–484.

26. Colette Le Cour Grandmaison, 'Rich cousins, poor cousins: Hidden stratification among the Omani Arabs in eastern Africa', *Africa* 59, 2 (1989), pp. 176–184.

the British imposed restrictions in the 1920s, such as requiring Omanis to obtain permission from the British Embassy in Muscat.<sup>27</sup> Under the British Protectorate, new land laws were introduced to clarify and regulate land administration. The Land Acquisition Decree of 1909 authorized the compulsory acquisition of land, while the Public Land Decree of 1921 empowered the government to grant or deny access to public land. The Land Survey Decree of 1912 and the Registration of Documents Decree of 1919 provided the basic land administration structure.<sup>28</sup> Garth Andrew Myers notes, ‘as more and more land passed into elite hands during this 30-year period, it became more commercialized and regulated than ever before’.<sup>29</sup>

These colonial interventions in land rights were met with strong resistance and became ‘one of the main bases of anti-colonial feeling’ in Zanzibar.<sup>30</sup> The British model of land regulation ultimately failed to take root and contributed to deepening divisions within Zanzibar’s diverse society.<sup>31</sup> As Arab and African identities became increasingly salient, ‘both sides, [...] used the rhetoric of dispossession to challenge the rights of the racial ‘other’ to reside in the islands’.<sup>32</sup> By the late 1950s ‘many Zanzibaris had come to believe that racial categories were fundamental to the constitution of society and that the behaviour of the racial ‘other’ could be understood in terms of inherent criminality’.<sup>33</sup> Yet, as Laura Fair notes, ethnic categories were also used strategically, with individuals redefining themselves in ways that would be most advantageous.<sup>34</sup>

As Marie-Aude Fouéré has pointed out, it was during this time that ‘two competing conceptions of national identity, citizenship, and sovereignty, built upon a polarizing racial paradigm’ were gaining hold in Zanzibar.<sup>35</sup>

27. Mandana E. Limbert, ‘Personal memories, revolutionary states and Indian Ocean migrations’, *MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 5 (2005), pp. 21–33, p. 24.

28. Mtaib Abdulla Othman, ‘Land legal regime in Tanzania Zanzibar: Access rights and land ownership to the protection of indigenous people’, *International Journal of Legal Development and Allied Issues* 6, 6 (2020), pp. 107–142.

29. Garth Andrew Myers, ‘Democracy and development in Zanzibar? Contradictions in land and environment planning’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 14, 2 (1996), pp. 221–245, p. 227.

30. *Ibid.* See also Abdul Sheriff and Ed Ferguson, *Zanzibar under colonial rule* (James Currey, London, 1991); Clayton, *The Zanzibar revolution and its aftermath*; Lofchie, *Zanzibar: Background to revolution*; Sheriff, *Slaves, spices & ivory in Zanzibar*.

31. The British colonial administration was methodical in its categorization of people into racial categories. In the 1958 census, they identified four racial categories: (i) Afro-Arab—which captured indigenous tribes, Zanzibari, Shirazi, Swahili, Arabs, mainland African, and Comorians; (ii) Asian other than Arab; (iii) European, and (iv) Somali and other (Zanzibar Protectorate 1960).

32. Jonathon Glassman, *War of words, war of stones: Racial thought and violence in colonial Zanzibar* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2011), p. 220.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Laura Fair, *Pastimes & politics: Culture, community, and identity in post-abolition urban Zanzibar, 1890–1945* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2001).

35. Marie-Aude Fouéré, ‘Remembering the dark years (1964–1975) in contemporary Zanzibar’, *Encounters: The International Journal for the Study of Culture and Society* 5 (2012), pp.

The racial and ethnic categories entrenched by colonialism laid the foundation for the formation of political parties. The Zanzibar National Party (ZNP), mainly composed of an elite of Arab descent, promoted a nationalist vision rooted in a cosmopolitan Islamic identity.<sup>36</sup> The Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP), whose members identified as Africans, advocated for a black African nationalism, accused Arabs of occupying the islands, and demanded land reform and the return of the islands to their 'true indigenous owners'. The much smaller Zanzibar and Pemba People's Party (ZPPP), with its main base in Pemba, was allied with the ZNP from 1961 to 1964 and, while less critical of the Arab elite than members of the ASP, was nevertheless in favour of 'a multi-racial alternative' to the ASP or the ZNP.<sup>37</sup> The South Asian population, which was 6.1 percent of the population of the Protectorate in 1958, but comprised about one fourth of the population of Stone Town, remained largely outside these competing nationalist narratives.<sup>38</sup>

*The expulsion of non-Africans and property confiscations in the context of the Zanzibar Revolution*

After the British withdrawal in November 1963, the Sultan of Zanzibar remained the titular head of the islands. Earlier that year, a coalition government under the Sultanate was elected, led by Prime Minister Muhammad Shante, the leader of the ZNP in coalition with the ZPPP. Tensions persisted between the ZNP and the ASP, whose members did not understand why they were not in power despite having won the popular vote.<sup>39</sup> One legacy of British control was the first-past-the-post electoral system, which can result in a party securing a majority of the vote, but not a majority of the parliamentary seats. The situation was exacerbated by the ZNP government's anti-mainlander actions, including the dismissal without compensation of a large number of police officers (many from the mainland), a ban on the Umma Party (a branch of the ASP striving for a socialist future), and the

113–126, p. 117; Garth Andrew Myers, 'Narrative representations of revolutionary Zanzibar', *Journal of Historical Geography* 26, 3 (2000), pp. 429–448, p. 434.

36. More socialist inclined Arab members of the ZNP formed the so-called Umma Party in 1963 and supported the ASP in the revolution before merging with it.

37. Michael Lofchie, 'Party conflict in Zanzibar', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 1, 2 (1963), pp. 185–207, p. 200.

38. 'Colonial discourse and Africa's colonized middle: Ajit Singh's architecture', *Historical Geography* 27 (1999), pp. 27–55, p. 33; Zanzibar Protectorate, *Report on the census of the population of Zanzibar Protectorate: Taken on the night of the 19th and 20th of March* (Zanzibar Protectorate, Zanzibar, 1958).

39. The division of the voting districts determined the final result. See Riikka Suhonen, 'Mapinduzi Daima—Revolution forever: Using the 1964 revolution in nationalistic political discourses in Zanzibar' (Master thesis, University of Helsinki, 2009); Nathaniel Mathews, *Zanzibar was a country: Exile and citizenship between East Africa and the Gulf* (University of California Press, Oakland, CA, 2024).

attempted arrest of its leader.<sup>40</sup> Members of the Umma Party were predominantly of Arab or Comorian descent, thus complicating an overly simplistic notion of a country clearly divided according to ethnic and racial categorizations.<sup>41</sup>

What followed is contested, but multiple sources agree that on the evening of 11 January 1964, a group of former police officers stormed the police headquarters in Unguja.<sup>42</sup> They were joined by cadres of the Umma party and members of the ASP Youth League. Even though the exact details of the subsequent fighting remain unclear, around 7 a.m. the next morning, John Okello, a Ugandan-born policeman and fighter for the ASP, announced the revolution and the end of the government from the main radio station. By the evening of 12 January 1964, Okello had declared himself the minister of defence and named Abeid Amani Karume, the founder of the ASP, as president.<sup>43</sup> While the Sultan and his family fled by boat, the ASP easily took control of the government and arrested its members. However, fighting continued for approximately a week between the so-called freedom fighters and Zanzibaris of Omani and Yemeni descent, as well as other 'foreign' residents, including South Asians and Comorians. Widespread looting and destruction occurred both in urban areas and the countryside. Although estimates vary, more than 10,000 Omani–Zanzibaris are believed to have been killed. In the months and years that followed, the new authoritarian government was quick to jail, exile, or kill any opposition.<sup>44</sup>

A major revolutionary action was the deportation of the Arab population.<sup>45</sup> Zanzibaris of Arab descent were told to 'go back home', though neither the Sultan of Muscat nor the new Zanzibari government organized any transportation.<sup>46</sup> With assistance from the International British Red Cross and other humanitarian agencies, by the end of 1964, Oman accepted around 3,700 refugees who could provide proof of their Omani ancestry.<sup>47</sup> Many

40. Lofchie, *Zanzibar: Background to revolution*; Sheriff and Ferguson, *Zanzibar under colonial rule*.

41. William Cunningham Bissell, *Urban design, chaos, and colonial power in Zanzibar* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2010); Loimeier, 'Memories of revolution'.

42. Garth Thomas Burgess, *Memories of the Zanzibari revolution* (Paper presented at ZIFF Conference, Zanzibar, 2007), Mathews, *Zanzibar was a country*.

43. Responding to international pressure, on 22 April 1964, Karume and Nyerere signed the article of the union as the formation of the United Republic of Tanzania.

44. Fouéré, 'Remembering the dark years (1964–1975) in contemporary Zanzibar'; Barwani et al., *Unser Leben vor der Revolution und danach*; Don Petterson, *Revolution in Zanzibar: An American's Cold War tale* (Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 2002).

45. Clayton, *The Zanzibar revolution and its aftermath*; Martin, *Zanzibar*.

46. Mathews, *Zanzibar was a country*.

47. According to a progress report from 17 August 1967 archived by the IBRC only 1021 travelled by ship to Muscat between September 1964 and December 1966 through funds made available by the British Government, Oxfam, Save the children, Christian Aid, and War on Want (PRO DO 185/68 Political Situation in Zanzibar, British Land Forces Kenya Conference, Zanzibar and Pemba (Report by T. H. Crosthwaite, confidential, closed until 2001), PRO DO 214/118 East German Aid to Zanzibar, PRO DO 214/119 East German Aid to Zanzibar).

more Zanzibaris of Omani descent fled to other countries in the Middle East and Africa. When Qaboos bin Sa'id overthrew his father and became sultan of Oman in 1970, he called for the return of Omanis from overseas, and the number of Zanzibari–Omanis in Oman grew to 10,000.<sup>48</sup> In addition to the targeted expulsions of Omani–Zanzibaris, as Akbar Keshodkar notes, the atrocities committed during the revolution also prompted many wealthy Asians to flee the islands.<sup>49</sup> According to Peter J. Martin, by 1972 only about 3,500 Arabs and Asians still lived in Zanzibar.<sup>50</sup>

Just weeks after the 1964 revolution, the Revolutionary Government promulgated the *Confiscation of Immovable Properties Decree* (Presidential Decree Number 8 of 1964), which empowered the state to seize property in the 'national interest' without compensation, so long as it did not cause 'undue hardship to the owner thereof'.<sup>51</sup> The decree fell somewhere between the radical nationalization that Okello was thought to support and the more moderate reforms favoured by Karume, who preferred the distribution of unused land.<sup>52</sup> Still, the law represented an explicit effort to redistribute property to 'get rid of imperialism, feudalism, and all other forms of exploitation'.<sup>53</sup> Further legislation followed. In 1965, a Public Lands Decree<sup>54</sup> vested all land under the guardianship of the government, and in 1966 the Land (Distribution) Decree enabled the government to merge and distribute confiscated property.<sup>55</sup> A newly established Land Distribution Office oversaw the redistribution of fertile land to members of the ASP in three-acre (*eka tatu*) right of occupancy deeds.<sup>56</sup> Between 1965 and 1972, more than 22,000 families received such 'three-acre plots', with the total area comprising about 70,000 acres.<sup>57</sup>

On 22 April 1964, the *Articles of Union* between Tanganyika and Zanzibar were signed by President Abeid Karume in Zanzibar. The negotiations, which were largely conducted in secret, coincided with broader (and ultimately unsuccessful) discussions about forming an East African

48. Valeri, 'Nation-building and communities in Oman since 1970', p. 485.

49. Keshodkar, 'Marriage as the means to preserve 'Asian-ness'', p. 227; Clayton, *The Zanzibar revolution and its aftermath*.

50. Martin, *Zanzibar: Tradition and revolution*, p. 71, again referring to the categories used by the government at the time.

51. Presidential Decree No. 8 of 1964, 'A Decree to Make Provision for the Confiscation of Immovable Property in Certain Cases'.

52. Mika Törhönen, *A thousand and one nights of land tenure* (The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, London, 1998), p. 34.

53. Shao, *The political economy of land reforms in Zanzibar*, p. 49.

54. Presidential Decree No. 13 of 1965, 'A Decree to Vest All Land in the Government'.

55. Presidential Decree No. 5 of 1966, 'A Decree to Make Provision for the Distribution of Land and Plantations'.

56. Törhönen, 'A thousand and one nights of land tenure'; Myers, 'Democracy and development in Zanzibar?'

57. Clayton, *The Zanzibar revolution and its aftermath*.

Federation that would also include Kenya.<sup>58</sup> A few days later, the *Articles of Union* were ratified by Tanganyika, and the formation of the United Republic of Tanzania was announced.<sup>59</sup> Under the Union government, 11 matters were reserved for the United Republic, but land tenure and administration were not among them. As a result, Zanzibar retained authority over land matters and continued the revolutionary project of property redistribution, uninterrupted.<sup>60</sup>

### *Engaging with the Zanzibar Revolution through confiscation orders*

As many scholars have pointed out, representations of the Zanzibar Revolution, as well as the use of the term itself, are highly contested. Indeed, 'we can witness [a] prolonged struggle for hegemony of interpretation in especially paradigmatic fashion'.<sup>61</sup> While some accounts align with broader political and ideological affiliations, others are grounded in personal or eyewitness experiences. As a result, multiple, and often passionately held, competing narratives coexist.<sup>62</sup> Our aim here is to highlight the role of property confiscations as a decisive part of the political events, and to demonstrate how a closer examination of property confiscations illuminates our understanding of the Zanzibar Revolution.

While property clearly plays a critical role in structuring social hierarchies and shaping access to and control over resources, it is also linked to a sense of belonging and identity.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the issue of property remains underexplored in scholarly engagements with the concept of home.<sup>64</sup> As Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling have highlighted, home can best be understood as relational, linking the material and the emotional.<sup>65</sup> Megan

58. Shivji, *Pan-Africanism or pragmatism*, p. 76.

59. There are questions as to whether Zanzibar ever legally ratified the Union.

60. The Union responsibilities were the constitution and the government of the United Republic; external affairs; defense; police; emergency powers; citizenship; immigration; external trade and borrowing; the public service of the United Republic; and taxes, harbors, civil aviation, posts and telegraphs.

61. Loimeier, *Memories of revolution*, p. 37.

62. Myers, 'Narrative representations of revolutionary Zanzibar', p. 430.

63. Nicholas Blomley, 'Precarious territory: Property law, housing, and the socio-spatial order', *Antipode* 52, 1 (2020), pp. 36–57; Laura Hammond, 'Tigrayan returnees' notions of home: Five variations on a theme', in Fran Markowitz and Anders H. Stefansson (eds), *Homecomings; unsettling paths of return* (Lexington Books, New York, NY, 2004), pp. 36–53; Sandra F. Joireman and Jason Brown, 'Property: Human right or commodity?', *Journal of Human Rights* 12, 2 (2013), pp. 165–179; Margaret Jane Radin, 'Property and personhood', *Stanford Law Review* 34, 5 (1982), pp. 957–1015; Anders H. Stefansson, 'Homes in the making: Property restitution, refugee return, and senses of belonging in a post-war Bosnian town', *International Migration* 44, 3 (2006), pp. 115–139.

64. Megan Nethercote, 'Racialized geographies of home: Property, unhoming and other possible futures', *Progress in Human Geography* 46, 4 (2022), pp. 935–959.

65. Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home* (Routledge, Oxford, 2006).

Nethercote observes, 'home is momentarily or irreparably unmade as (im) material dimensions of home are divested, damaged or destroyed'.<sup>66</sup> Against this background, it is unsurprising that the confiscations carried out during the revolution profoundly unsettled previous owners' sense of home and belonging. Indeed, as our ethnographic insights confirm, for many families who lost property during the Revolution, the confiscation process, the subsequent history of the property, and the possibility of reclaiming it remain deeply significant.

Despite the large number of confiscated properties and the impact on individuals, there has been limited academic engagement with the subject. Myers addresses the issue in his work on 'Africa's colonized middle', focusing on confiscations in Zanzibar City and the story of a successful attempt to avoid confiscation by the Asian architect Ajit Singh.<sup>67</sup> However, in his broader treatment of revolutionary narratives, confiscations are only mentioned briefly.<sup>68</sup> In her work on memories of the Revolution, Marie-Aude Fouéré discusses general feelings of oppression and violence, yet does not refer to the confiscation of property.<sup>69</sup> Scholarship has tended to focus more on new landowners and the redistribution of rural three-acre plots. In the context of urban conservation, especially in Stone Town, some references have been made to the confiscation of urban properties and the resulting legacy of neglect.<sup>70</sup>

When the government wanted to promote the conservation of the old part of Zanzibar City in 1985, one of the first measures was to offer some of the confiscated properties to the tenants at low prices, on condition that the new owners would do the necessary repairs and renovations within 2 years. According to Ulrich Malisius, by 1987, the government had sold more than 80 houses.<sup>71</sup> In recent years, this practice has gained renewed momentum, as investments are urgently needed for the restoration and further touristification of Stone Town.

66. Nethercote, 'Racialized geographies of home', p. 941.

67. Garth Andrew Myers, 'Colonial discourse and Africa's colonized middle: Ajit Singh's architecture', *Historical Geography* 27 (1999), pp. 27–55.

68. Myers, 'Narrative representations of revolutionary Zanzibar'.

69. Fouéré, 'Remembering the dark years (1964–1975) in contemporary Zanzibar'.

70. For an example, see Törhönen, 'A thousand and one nights of land tenure'. After the revolution, these buildings started to deteriorate and even collapse due to lack of maintenance, see Ulrich Malisius, 'The Stone Town of Zanzibar—Conservation of a difficult heritage' 1987, <<https://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/686/1/wash14.pdf>> accessed August 21, 2025 and Sheriff, 'Contradictions in the heritagization of Zanzibar 'Stone Town''. This became an issue in the context of a growing awareness of the potential of Stone Town as a tourist attraction. See also UNCHS, *The Stone Town of Zanzibar: A technical report* (Ministry of Lands, Construction & Housing, Zanzibar, 1983) and Aga Khan Trust for Culture, *A plan for the historic Stone Town* (AKTC, Rome, 1996).

71. Malisius, 'The Stone Town of Zanzibar'.

As noted in the introduction, selling confiscated properties to those who are not the original owners can be painful to those who are trying hard to regain confiscated family property. It is individual narratives of the past and memories of home in Zanzibar that have triggered our interest in looking more closely at the process of property confiscation. Our conversations with Zanzibaris of Omani descent have revealed intense feelings of loss and a strong desire to reclaim family property. Yet, knowledge of these confiscations often remains limited to oral family histories and the occasional surviving photographs.

*Methodology: turning to documents*

When we began this project, our goal was to determine how Omani-Zanzibaris were recovering property lost during the Revolution. Through the collection of oral histories from South Asian and Omani-Zanzibari individuals, conducted during multiple visits to Zanzibar and Oman, as well as over Zoom, we expanded our focus to include the legal context of property confiscations. This allowed us to situate the Zanzibari case within broader debates on property loss and restitution in post-conflict settings.<sup>72</sup> In searching for copies of the early Zanzibari land laws at the Library of Congress in the USA, we found some of the confiscation orders for properties taken under the 1964 Confiscation of Immovable Properties Decree. On further investigation, we were able to locate physical copies of all the confiscation orders that were bound into the Legal Supplement Gazettes of the Zanzibari Revolutionary Government.<sup>73</sup> Some of these were in English, and some were in the Swahili versions of the gazettes. Most of the Swahili confiscation orders, far fewer in number, were identical to those in English. However, there were a few unique confiscation orders in Swahili and many more English orders with no corresponding Swahili version. All of these are public documents issued by the Revolutionary Government, naming the properties they were going to confiscate, the owners, and their location (see [Figure 1](#)). In urban areas, the locational data are often precise, including street names, neighbourhoods, and house numbers. In rural areas, the descriptions are typically more general, identifying neighbouring properties or using physical features of the land as reference points.

72. Sandra F. Joireman and Rosine Tchatchoua-Djomo, 'Post-conflict restitution of customary land: Guidelines and trajectories of change', *World Development* (2023), p. 106272; Sandra F. Joireman, *Peace, preference and property: Return migration after violent conflict* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2022); Stefansson, 'Homes in the making'.

73. The Library of Congress collection of The Zanzibar Government Official Gazette and Gazette Supplements (1964-to date) was incomplete and was supplemented by holdings at the University of Bayreuth, Germany in hard copy and microfilm.

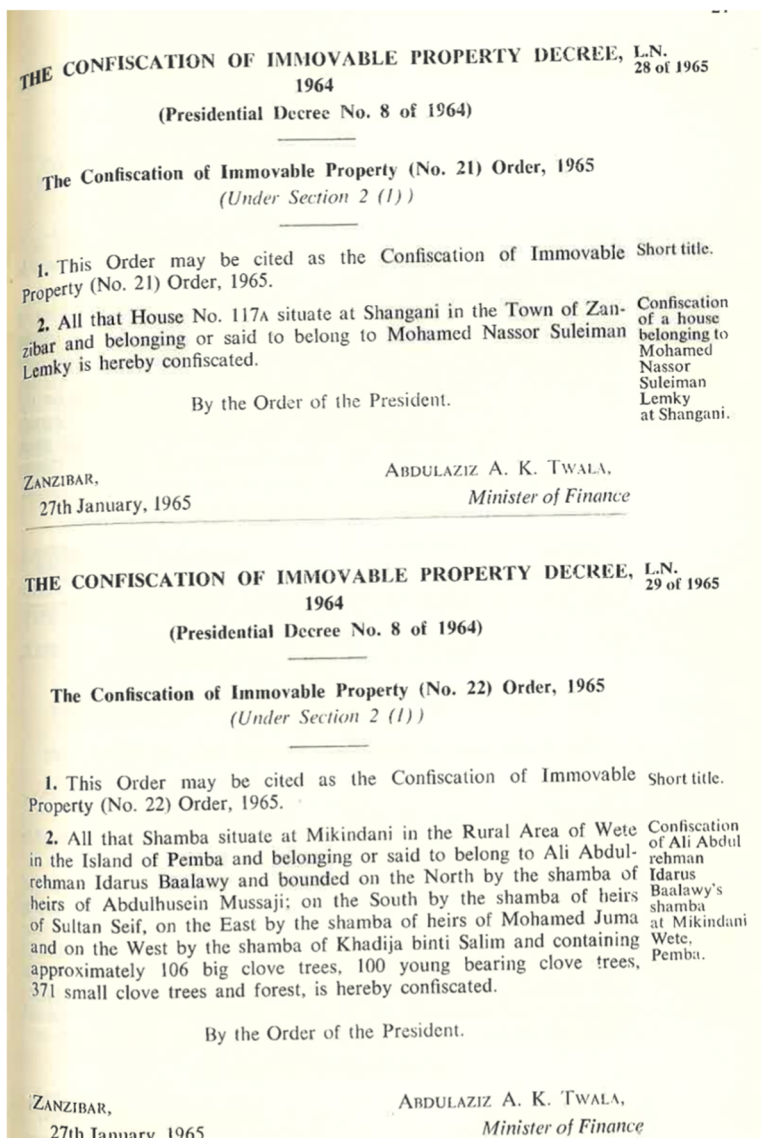


Figure 1 Example of confiscation orders.

In addition to the confiscation orders, we were also able to find 27 revocation orders, where the government returned property that it had taken under the 1964 Decree.<sup>74</sup>

74. There was no reason given in the Revocation Orders for why the property was being returned.

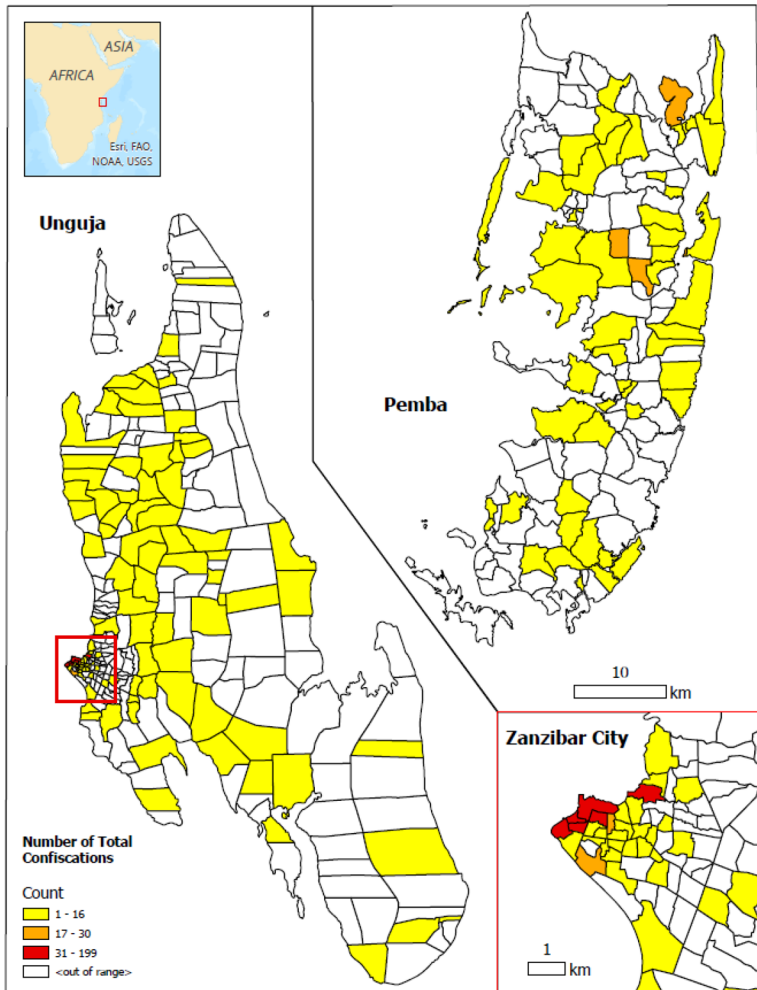
The presence and scope of these documents highlight the importance of looking for archival evidence to interrogate political narratives of the past. Taking often neglected archival resources into account provides empirical data to engage with narratives of highly contested political events. We believe this dataset to be unique because of its specificity in naming individual properties. Despite the fact that these confiscation orders were public documents, the unsettled political environment rendered the archival sources largely invisible, even to the families who lost property.

While we possess all the published confiscation orders from the Gazette, we know this dataset to be incomplete. First, interviews and public accounts indicate that some properties were taken without any confiscation orders. For example, during a ride on a local minibus from Mkoani to Chake in Pemba, Said, our long-term research assistant, pointed to a house along the roadside, explaining that it had belonged to his family and was the birthplace of his uncle. After the family migrated to Oman, the property was taken by the government, but no formal confiscation order was ever issued. Additionally, some properties were taken prior to the Confiscation Decree of 1964, and it has been noted elsewhere that the official procedures established by the Confiscation of Immovable Property Decree were 'followed lightly'.<sup>75</sup> Second, there is reason to believe that not all the promulgated confiscation orders were compiled in the Gazette. This suspicion arises from gaps in the sequential numbering of the orders. For instance, Order Number 3 of 1965 may be followed by Order Number 7, suggesting that intermediate orders may exist but were not published. Thus, while we have a complete set of the published confiscation orders in the Gazettes (English and Swahili), the collection does not constitute a full record of all properties confiscated.

We digitized all the confiscation orders, creating both a database of the PDFs of each document and a spreadsheet with a list of property owners, dates of confiscations, locations, any identifying characteristics of the plaintiffs, and any additional information (neighbours listed, type of property) that might be present in the document. We then used this database to compile statistics on the number and date of the confiscation orders. With the assistance of colleagues in Zanzibar, we were able to locate properties in the different *shhias* (wards) on the islands of both Pemba and Unguja.<sup>76</sup> Once we had identified the wards of the confiscation, we were able to use ArcGIS Pro Version 3.1 to georeference the dataset and map the spatial distribution of the property confiscations across Zanzibar, as seen in [Figure 2](#).

75. Shivji, *Pan-Africanism or pragmatism*, p. 61; Törhönen, 'A thousand and one nights of land tenure', p. 36.

76. We are very grateful to Mohamed Said Chande from the Land Commission in Zanzibar for his expert help in identifying the locations of properties with incomplete spatial references.



*Figure 2* Location of property confiscations in Zanzibar.

The figure above maps out the place of each property listed in the confiscation orders. Some confiscation orders addressed more than a single property, and in the first years after the Revolution, 1964 and 1965, there were some confiscation orders that listed 200 or more properties in the same area.

*The Zanzibar Revolution through the lens of confiscation orders*

Although the Zanzibar gazettes are publicly available, and copies can be accessed in different libraries around the world, there are few references to

the published confiscation orders and little systematic engagement with the data they contain.<sup>77</sup> Whenever we mentioned the existence of confiscation orders in our conversations with those whose families lost property in the Revolution, they were eager to see any documents related to their families, and often asked us to find out more about specific properties. For some, the confiscation orders served as material proof of a past life the family had to abandon. In some cases, families had preserved copies of their confiscation orders and were happy to show them to us, often together with a photograph of the respective house. An elderly Arab in Malindi sent us screenshots of the Swahili gazettes his family had kept, documenting the confiscation as well as the revocation of the order for the confiscation of three family houses in Stone Town.

It was striking to see how the documents simultaneously evoked warm, nostalgic memories of family life before the Revolution, and painful recollections of forced displacement. In a conversation with Ashok Mulji, for instance, he told us how the confiscation order was kept with other important documents, such as his communication with lawyers in his attempt to regain the property, as well as old family photographs, such as an image of his father in front of the house on the coronation day of Queen Elizabeth II.<sup>78</sup> These materials not only served as legal and historical evidence, but also became deeply personal artefacts of memory and loss. Beyond individual interest in specific properties, the analysis of all Gazetted confiscations offers a valuable window into the historical moment of the Revolution and its aftermath.

### *Number and timeframe of confiscations*

The majority of recorded confiscations during the first decade occurred in 1965, for which we have orders documenting the confiscation of 544 properties. Confiscations under the 1964 decree continued well into the 1980s (see [Figure 3](#)), with the latest confiscation occurring in September 1987, regarding a property in Maruhubi on the west coast of Unguja.<sup>79</sup>

These data suggest a significantly different time frame for the economic impact of the Revolution than is typically acknowledged. The Revolution is often characterized as a brief, but brutal episode of violence. For example, in his recent book on Zanzibar, Nathaniel Mathews divides the aftermath

77. For example, Myers, 'Colonial discourse and Africa's colonized middle'.

78. Interview with the authors via Zoom, 3 November 2023.

79. The 1964 decree allowed the government to take property without compensation to the owners. Eminent domain in common law systems, or expropriation in civil law systems refers to the taking of property for purposes of public use with compensation. In Zanzibar, eminent domain was governed by the 1923 Land Acquisition Decree until 1992 when it was supplanted by the Zanzibar Land Tenure Act. In Zanzibar, from the Revolution to the current day, all residual rights in land belong to the government.

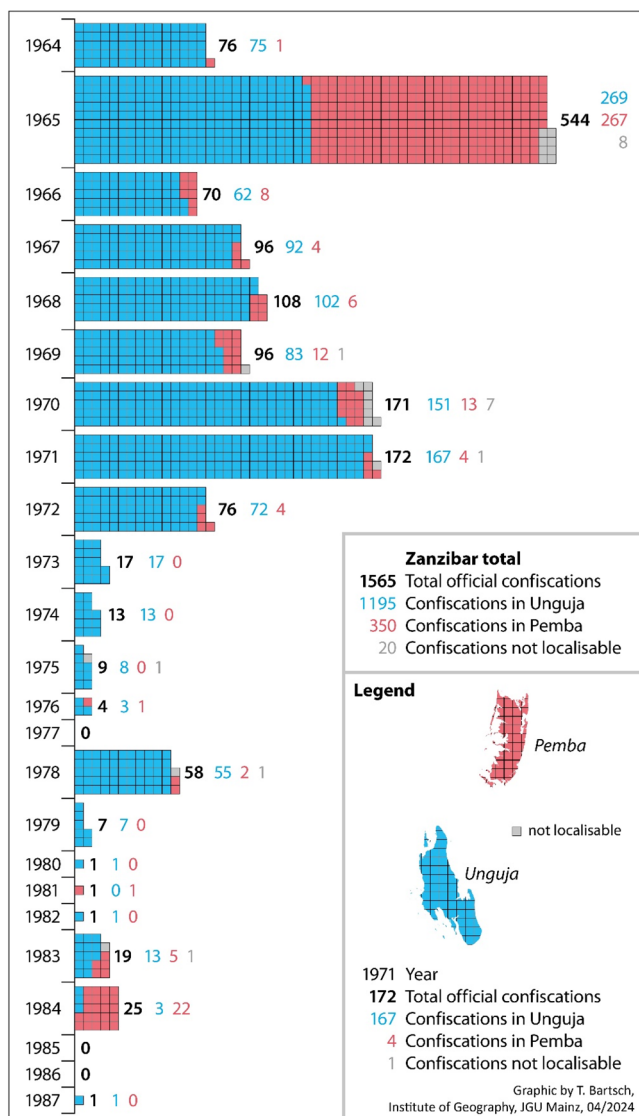


Figure 3 Official confiscations from 1964 to 1987 in Zanzibar by year.

of the Revolution into two periods: the several days of ‘revolutionary upheaval’ and the 6 to 12 months following.<sup>80</sup> Direct acts of public fighting and violence in the streets ended shortly after the overthrow of the

80. Mathews, *Zanzibar was a country*, p. 52.

government on 12 January 1964. While it is well established that deportations, incarcerations, and various forms of oppression targeting Arabs and South Asians continued after the initial upheaval, confiscations under the 1964 decree show that property on the islands was not safe for *decades* after the Revolution.<sup>81</sup> This makes Zanzibar quite unusual in terms of property losses due to conflict. It is far more common to see property losses focused during the time of violence, and restitution efforts beginning one to two decades after the conflict ends.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, our analysis makes it clear that many of the confiscated properties belonged to South Asians, a group whose experience of the Revolution is rarely discussed.<sup>83</sup> Notably, there was a marked increase in property confiscations during 1970 and 1971, with a substantial number of these properties registered under Asian names. Asians were poorly treated after the Revolution, subject to arbitrary deportation, and sometimes refused readmission to Zanzibar after travel.<sup>84</sup> In 1970, President Karume announced that Asians would no longer be granted trade licenses, and in 1971, he declared that all non-citizen Asians would be expelled from Zanzibar.<sup>85</sup> What happened to Asians in Zanzibar with this late confiscation of their properties mirrors what was happening in other parts of East Africa, where Asian communities were expelled and dispossessed.<sup>86</sup>

### *Type and location of properties*

As previously noted, the confiscation orders usually include a location, which may consist of the ward or street in which the property is located. For *mashamba* (land, sing. *shamba*), they often also include the names of the neighbouring landowners. By georeferencing and mapping this information, we are able to gain deeper insights into the confiscations. Across all three decades in which confiscations under the 1964 decree occurred, the largest percentage of properties was confiscated in Unguja, but the specific proportion varied greatly depending on each decade (see [Table 1](#)). While

81. Shao reports that redistribution of agricultural land was supposed to have stopped in 1967, although the practice continued after (Shao, *The political economy of land reforms in Zanzibar*), pp. 52–53.

82. Joireman, *Peace, preference, and property*.

83. Keshodkar, 'Indian Ocean trade and emerging pathways of mobility in neoliberal Zanzibar'.

84. Clayton, *The Zanzibar revolution and its aftermath*, pp. 121–122.

85. Ronald Aminzade, *Race, nation, and citizenship in post-colonial Africa* (Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, 2013), pp. 201–202.

86. Sara Cosemans, 'Undesirable British East African Asians. Nationality, statelessness, and refugeehood after empire', *Immigrants & Minorities* 40, 1–2 (2022), pp. 210–239; Vali Jamal, 'Asians in Uganda, 1880–1972: Inequality and expulsion', *The Economic History Review* 29, 4 (1976), pp. 602–616.

*Table 1* Location of property confiscations by island

<i>Location of property confiscation</i>	<i>1960s (%)</i>	<i>1970s (%)</i>	<i>1980s (%)</i>	<i>Total number of properties</i>
<i>Number of properties</i>	990 (63.3)	527 (33.7)	48 (3.1)	1,565
<i>Unguja</i>	683 (43.6)	493 (31.5)	19 (1.2)	1,195 (76.3)
<i>Houses</i>	517	481	19	1,017
<i>Land</i>	166	12	0	178
<i>Pemba</i>	301 (19.2)	34 (2.2)	28 (1.8)	363 <sup>a</sup> (23.1)
<i>Houses</i>	32	34	27	93
<i>Land</i>	270	0	0	270
<i>Location unidentifiable</i>	6 (0.4)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.0)	7 (0.5)

<sup>a</sup>Thirteen of the confiscated properties on Pemba (3 in the 1960s and 10 in the 1970s) have no identifiable ward, so we are not able to georeference them.

confiscations in the 1970s were more concentrated on Unguja, rates during the 1980s were nearly equal across Unguja and Pemba and occurred in both urban and rural areas. One of the more striking findings from our analysis is the considerable number of confiscations that took place on Pemba, approximately 25 percent of the total. This challenges earlier interpretations. For example, Ibrahim Fokas Shao concluded that land confiscations were concentrated on valuable plantations on Unguja, not Pemba.<sup>87</sup> According to our data, 271 plantations were confiscated in Pemba between 1965 and 1969. The number for Unguja was only 179, so even if the size of plantations in Pemba were smaller, the confiscation of land in Pemba is far from negligible.<sup>88</sup> Mika Törhönen, drawing on Shao, estimated that the total number of farms confiscated amounted to 745, with 181 on Unguja and 564 on Pemba.<sup>89</sup> While the number for Unguja fits our data, the Pemba number does not align with the gazetted confiscation records, indicating a lack of thorough engagement with the confiscations in Pemba.<sup>90</sup>

The most discussed property confiscations in the literature are those that occurred in the Stone Town area of Zanzibar City.<sup>91</sup> According to Myers,

87. Shao, *The political economy of land reforms in Zanzibar*.

88. Frederick Cooper, *From slaves to squatters: Plantation labor and agriculture in Zanzibar and coastal Kenya, 1890–1925* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1980); Sherrif and Ferguson, *Zanzibar under colonial rule*.

89. Törhönen, 'A thousand and one nights of land tenure'; Shao, *The political economy of land reforms in Zanzibar*, p. 50.

90. We were not able to locate five of them.

91. Myers, 'Democracy and development in Zanzibar?'; Myers 'Colonial discourse and Africa's colonized middle'.

the government confiscated 797 homes in and around Zanzibar City (Mjini region), with Arab and Asian homes the primary targets and *mji mkongwe* the place of 65 percent of these confiscations.<sup>92</sup> Our analysis shows that at least 673 houses (43 percent of all confiscated properties) were confiscated in Stone Town. Another 302 properties were confiscated in Mjini outside of Stone Town, and 75 properties are located in what today belongs to Zanzibar's urban west (Magharibi A (38) and Magharibi B (37)) and 145 in different villages on Unguja. On Pemba, 95 of the confiscations were in the urban areas of Wete and Chake.

### *Whose properties?*

In 1995, a political activist in Zanzibar told William Cunningham Bissell, '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'.<sup>93</sup> Myers, however, has pointed out that many houses were confiscated regardless of whether the owners had left Zanzibar or not.<sup>94</sup> This aligns with Keshodkar's understanding that many Asians were left homeless when their properties were seized by the government.<sup>95</sup> These houses were rented out by the government to poor tenants, often from the rural areas.<sup>96</sup>

The main targets of the confiscations were certainly property owners of Arab and Asian descent, who were labelled 'Destroyers of National Development'.<sup>97</sup> Within a timespan of 18 years, Ahmed's family officially lost 37 houses in Stone Town according to the gazetted confiscation orders and four shambas. Two of the houses in Shanghani were revoked in 1973. In 2024, they were still negotiating conditions for the return of another property on the waterfront, close to the palace.

In the 1970s, more than 50 percent of the confiscations concerned property owners with identifiable South Asian names. In general, South Asians had their property confiscated at over 1.5 times higher the rate in the 1970s and 1980s compared to the immediate post-revolutionary period. Only a small share of the confiscations concerned corporations, such as properties owned by the Aga Khan Foundation. However, the confiscation orders include some prominent businesses and merchant families, like Karimjee, Mulji, Shivanji, and Patel. Generally, businesses or corporations were less

92. Myers, *Ibid*, p. 443.

93. Bissell, 'Engaging colonial nostalgia', p. 218.

94. Myers, 'Democracy and development in Zanzibar?'

95. Keshodkar, 'Marriage as the means to preserve 'Asian-ness'.

96. Myers, 'Democracy and development in Zanzibar?'; Myers, 'Colonial discourse and Africa's colonized middle'.

97. Myers, 'Narrative representations of revolutionary Zanzibar', p. 443.

likely to have their property confiscated as more time elapsed after the revolution. This trend may be partially attributed to the significant number of Aga Khan properties confiscated between 1968 and 1970. Although most property owners named on the confiscation orders are male, 104 out of the 1,565 properties have identifiable, named female owners.<sup>98</sup> In the 1970s, the confiscation of female-owned properties was about 10 percent. While the documents do not reveal the reasons for this, it may be that some female household heads lost their husbands in the violence of the revolution.

### *Revocations and other ways to avoid confiscation*

In addition to the numerous Confiscation Orders, we identified a smaller number of Revocation Orders—documents that restored property to its original owners. In total, we found 26 Revocation Orders and one official cancellation of a confiscation in the period between 1964 and 1987. All pertain to properties in Stone Town and directly adjacent areas. The orders themselves do not provide explanations for the return of the property.

As Myers noted in the case of Ajit Singh, whose property in Kikwajuni was officially confiscated in 1966 (confiscation order 29/1966), some people were able to stop property confiscations.<sup>99</sup> Most families did not know the reason for the revocation. One of our interviewees only recalled that the father went somewhere to complain about the confiscation, but he did not know the arguments and the reason for his success, as his father died without passing on the story. In the case of Ajit Singh, the return of the property was granted after an audience with the president in which the family of Ajit Singh successfully asserted their family's 'Zanzibari-ness'.<sup>100</sup> However, no official revocation order appears in the gazette, highlighting the gaps in the archival record. Another strategy to avoid confiscation was to register property with the *waqf*<sup>101</sup> commission, while keeping it under private custodianship. As Khalfan and Ogura state, 'this latter practice began as an experiment, and was done rather cautiously at the outset, but it seems to have gathered strength in tandem with political stability of the 1980s'.<sup>102</sup> The number of houses that were registered as *waqf* increased from around 200 in 1964 to more than 350 buildings in 2000.<sup>103</sup>

98. We do not have data on the overall percentage of women who were property owners, so we cannot comment on whether they were more or less likely to be victims of confiscation.

99. Myers, 'Democracy and development in Zanzibar?', p. 433.

100. Ibid.

101. *Waqf* is an Islamic endowment of property or a trust dedicated to charitable purposes.

102. Khalfan Khalfan and Nobuyuki Ogura, 'The contribution of Islamic waqf to managing the conservation of buildings in the historic Stone Town of Zanzibar', *International Journal of Cultural Property* 19, 2 (2012), pp. 153–174, p. 161.

103. Daniel Maxwell, Kirsten Gelsdorf, and Martina Santschi, 'Livelihoods, basic services and social protection in South Sudan' (Working Paper, Feinstein International Center, Friedman

Nasser Abdallah Riyami reports that some families were also able to retain their properties indirectly by entrusting them to 'loyal supervisors of their family's confiscated farms'.<sup>104</sup> Telling them 'to speak ill of them in front of the Agricultural Department officials' allowed them to receive at least three acres, which were reallocated after confiscations.<sup>105</sup> Ahmed also tells us a story in which the new inhabitants unofficially returned a property to his family, as they felt it was *haram* (unlawful) to live there. Others agreed that there were several cases where properties were returned informally, as 'people felt they could not pray in a house that was not rightfully theirs'.<sup>106</sup>

On Pemba, some land was returned to its previous owners due to procedural violations. Several court cases concerning the newly distributed three-acre plots focused on the fact that the confiscations of the property that was being redistributed had not been gazetted and registered as they should have been.<sup>107</sup> To avoid further disputes, the Land Tenure Act of 1992, Part II, paragraph 4, finally declared all confiscations that took place after the revolution legal, independent of the procedure used.

### *Implications of the database*

Overall, the existing literature on the Zanzibar Revolution reveals an absence of analysis of the political and moral economy of property confiscations. Although property confiscations are well known, they have not been subject to sustained or detailed investigation. While it is not uncommon to have property confiscated in times of violent conflict, it is unusual, particularly in the African context, to have it so well documented by the government as it is occurring.<sup>108</sup> This documentation allows us to revisit the violence of the revolution with more distance from the actual events at a time when families formerly dispossessed are officially encouraged to re-engage with the islands. It is also unusual to see efforts to reclaim property begin so long after the violence that led to the original dispossession. For example, in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War, there is already a register established for Ukrainians who have lost or damaged property.

A closer look at property confiscation in Zanzibar has the potential to reshape the narrative of the Revolution. The data reveal that the Revolution took place over a much longer timespan than often assumed. Instead of a brief political upheaval, acts of dispossession continued for decades. A more

School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Boston, 2012).

104. Nasser Abdallah Riyami, *Zanzibar: Personalities and events (1828–1972)* (Beirut Bookshop, Muscat, 2012), p. 209.

105. *Ibid.*

106. Interview with Nassor, 12 January 2024.

107. Törhönen, 'A thousand and one nights of land tenure'.

108. Joireman and Tchatchoua-Djomo, 'Post-conflict restitution of customary land'.

thorough engagement with the timing, scale, and geography of the confiscations allows for a more accurate understanding of the Revolution's long-term effects and a more complicated narrative in terms of whose properties were taken, where, and when.

The legacy of these confiscations remains highly visible today, particularly in Stone Town, where many tenants have lacked the financial means to maintain their homes over the past several decades (see [Figure 4](#)).<sup>109</sup> This deterioration is one of the key reasons the government has recently promoted the sale of confiscated houses to international investors. Yet for families who have been unable to reclaim their ancestral properties, these transactions serve as painful reminders of the Revolution and the losses it inflicted.

Confiscated houses in Stone Town are a material grounding of memories of the Revolution, memories which were often suppressed. As Fouéré emphasized:

The memories of violence and repression perpetrated by revolutionaries and the state from 1964 to 1975 have long been banished from the public space. The official narrative of the 1964 revolution and the first phase of the post-revolutionary period developed and propagated by the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar through a control over the production, transmission, and circulation of ideas, combined with repressive measures against dissenting voices, led people to keep their memories private.<sup>110</sup>

In this respect, a reference to lost properties and the material representation of the harm experienced by the Revolutionary Government can be regarded as a crucial way to deal with the experiences of the past.

Social media has emerged as an important space where stories and memories of the Zanzibar Revolution are shared. In a Facebook group dedicated to Oman–Zanzibar relations, the issue of property confiscation appears regularly. Historic photographs are often posted to solicit help in identifying the people or places depicted, but some images explicitly reference confiscated properties. These are frequently accompanied by a desire to learn more about the recent history of a building, to share family stories of property loss, or to explore possibilities for restitution. The social media space highlights the sense of belonging that people still feel towards Zanzibar, even after decades of displacement.

In our conversations with Zanzibari–Omanis and Asian Zanzibaris, we found that many were unaware of the sheer number of confiscations and the fact that these events were documented in official records. In this regard,

109. Also Sheriff, 'Contradictions in the heritagization of Zanzibar 'Stone Town'.

110. Fouéré, 'Remembering the dark years (1964–1975) in contemporary Zanzibar', p. 113.



*Figure 4* A confiscated house in Stone Town in 2024. Photo credit: Sandra F. Joireman

the database offers a way not only for scholars but also for those directly affected by the loss of property, to finally learn more about the context and scale of confiscations.<sup>111</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The Zanzibar Revolution is often remembered as a brief eruption of violence and regime change in 1964, but this article demonstrates that its material and emotional consequences unfolded over decades. Drawing on a previously underexamined archive of government-issued confiscation orders, we have shown that property expropriations persisted through the 1980s, revealing the Revolution as a long arc of dispossession. These acts were not limited

111. The database is accessible on Harvard Dataverse after 1 November 2025.

to high-profile urban properties, or a single ethnic group, but occurred across Zanzibar, reshaping landscapes and livelihoods in ways that continue to reverberate. The Confiscation Orders raise questions that need to be pursued in further research. One of the most obvious is: what has happened to these confiscated properties?

As Zanzibar continues to grapple with questions of heritage preservation, urban development, and national identity, the legacies of revolutionary property loss remain visibly etched into crumbling walls and family memories. In recent years, as some of those whose family property has been confiscated have tried to regain these properties or have invested in new housing, the material grounding of translocal and diasporic communities has become visible.

Nobel-winning Zanzibari writer Abdulrazak Gurnah addresses the trauma of property confiscation in his 2017 novel *Gravel Heart*.<sup>112</sup> Other such stories remain untold, but reveal important aspects of the complex relationship between property and identity in post-conflict settings. The full story of the Zanzibar Revolution and the experiences of those who were impacted by it have always been hidden in shadow because the authoritarian post-revolutionary government made it dangerous to ask questions or criticize its policies. The Revolution has also been contested, with a variety of competing narratives around what happened and why. Illumination of these public records on property confiscations moves us towards a more complete and complex understanding of what happened as a result of the events of January 1964. This article contributes to a growing body of work on the political and moral economies of property in post-conflict settings by offering both empirical data and interpretive analysis. The confiscation orders, rare examples of official documentation of dispossession, are not only bureaucratic records but affective artefacts for those who lost property. They illuminate ties between property, identity, and historical justice. These data enables both scholars and affected communities to re-narrate the Revolution with greater granularity.

This work also highlights that scholarship of violent conflict might miss key elements when it relies solely on narrative. The material evidence of conflict in both property and archival records forces us to reconsider the nature and breadth of the violence, illuminating aspects of conflict previously hidden in public and scholarly discourse.

112. Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Gravel heart* (Bloomsbury, New York, 2017). He also addresses the relationship between property and identity in Zanzibar in other novels.

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