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Zanzibar- the Spice Kingdom

For the past several years I have been involved in the Development Study for the National Irrigation Master Plan in Tanzania, and to date my work as a study team member has taken me to Zanzibar several times. Having worked in the Middle East for many years, it has long been my dream to visit Zanzibar which has had a close relationship with the Arab region since ancient times due to the trade by Dhow Boats. Zanzibar consists mainly of two islands; Unguja and Pemba. The main town in the western peninsula of Unguja is called Stone Town and there you can find rows of old Arabic houses. Strolling through the town's maze of small streets makes you feel as if you were in a souk in Oman or Yemen. Swahili has a strong Arabic influence in its origins, but here I felt the influence of the Arabic language much more strongly than I did in mainland Tanzania.

Zanzibar has long been renowned as a producer of a great variety of spices. In particular the export of cloves has supported its economy for a long time. In recent years, however, clove production has been rapidly declining due to the severe competition posed by foreign markets, the aging of plants, and damage caused by disease or pests. Moreover, the population increase on the islands has been putting pressure on the limited land resources, leading to soil erosion and the drying-up of catchment areas. These in turn are negatively affecting production of perennial crops including cloves. Given these circumstances, for more than ten years the government of Zanzibar has been searching for alternative cash crops to replace cloves, but so far no significant option has been identified.

Zanzibar has a wealth of tourism resources; beautiful seas with white coral reefs, green forests and various historical sites left by old Arabic conquerors, and historic relics from the slave-trade period. "Spice Tours" that visit spice farms are also organized for tourists. I joined one of these tours and was introduced to more than 30 kinds of spice and fruit tree within just a few hours. In addition to tree spices such as cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg, more common spices like cardamom, anis and turmeric as well as tropical fruits like durian and jackfruit are also grown on the farms.

As a future direction of Zanzibar's agricultural or regional development, collaboration / merging with tourism development will be an important issue. Rather than searching for alternative cash crops to replace cloves for export, it might be better to make more effective use of the historical value of the islands in their role as the Kingdom of Spices. Also, it must be important to ensure an all-year-round supply of fresh vegetables to hotels and restaurants for tourism development. For this purpose some activities may be necessary to provide support for the existing farms to convert the products to cater for the tourism industry. In the Master Plan which is being implemented at the moment, the important role of irrigation development in the joint development of agriculture and tourism was also emphasized. I hope that the livelihood of people in Zanzibar can be improved through the harmonized development of tourism and agriculture, while keeping the landscape and environment of the Kingdom of Spices unchanged.

(By Onuma in Zanzibar, 2003 August)



Clove



Cinnamon



Nutmeg



Cardamom



Anis



Turmeric