

Some Notes: On the Indian Ocean

**Honorable Members of the Zanzibar Government,
Excellencies, Distinguished Guests – Assalaamu
Alaykum and Good evening – All Protocol Observed.**

1. I am honored to have been invited to make this presentation at such an important and inspiring occasion – the launching of ZIORI. I must state from the outset that I cannot say anything new or add to what has been brilliantly stated in the Executive Summary of ZIORI. So for the next ten minutes you will have to put up with a lot of repetition from me.

2. The importance of the Indian Ocean – both historically and at present – cannot be overstated.

(a) It is a very large if not the largest Ocean in the world,

(b) It is bounded by major populated land masses

© It is less rough and calmer than both the Atlantic and Pacific

(d) It is surrounded by five major civilizations – African, Arab/Persian, Hindu/Buddhist, Malaya and Chinese;

(e) It is endowed with the monsoon winds which enables sailing ships to sail both ways – i.e. to go to distant destination and return to home base.

These characteristics have enabled the Indian Ocean to become the center of world economy, politics and civilisational interaction up to the 16th century. It is now resurrecting and emerging again as the center of the world economy and politics. While up to the 16th century it played a global role without military conquest and domination by any of the powers in the five civilizations surrounding it, the question now is whether it will repeat its old model or continue the Euro/American model of military conquest and domination?

3. The launching of ZIORI is an important event with wider implications for Zanzibar, East Africa and the Indian Ocean littoral. It is surprising that it has taken so long for Zanzibar and East Africa to establish an Institute focusing on the Indian Ocean.

4. There are many reasons for this delay in focusing on the Indian Ocean. Firstly we have adopted the European model of looking at the world - to focus on distinctive land mass areas such as Africa, Arabia , India, Asia etc. – instead of the Ocean. Secondly, our leaders and intellectuals are rarely interested in countries and cultures outside Africa. Consequently, we are seriously ignorant of the role East Africa – and the Indian Ocean as a whole - have played in world history. However better late than never and Zanzibar is an appropriate place to take this initiative. If it had delayed for only two years, the initiative would have been taken by Lamu.

5. I am very happy and also certain that ZIORI will soon begin to open our eyes to a perspective of our past which we had ignored. Our past, our history, has shaped our present. And as Shakespeare has wisely said a long time ago, “the future is in the womb of the present”. And ZIORI is not only going to explore our past but will do so in order to understand our present. And in doing this it will implicitly be identifying processes which are leading us to our future.

6. At this point I need your forgiveness and patience so that I can talk a little bit about myself as an example – of the importance of the Indian Ocean – to our lives in the past and today.

I come from the island of Lamu. When I was a young boy, my father owned several sailing dhows – all built in Lamu. They had no motor/engines – only sails. One of my favorite dhow, used to sail from Lamu to Kismayu (Somalia) return to Lamu then sail to Mombasa, Zanzibar and Kilwa. The dhow was always fully loaded – both going and returning. The crew and the captain were all local people.

One year the same dhow sailed from Lamu to Mogadishu, to Aden, Mukalla and back to Lamu on its way to Mombasa, the final destination. The same dhow later continued to sail along the entire coast.

I personally sailed from Lamu to Mombasa and my younger brother spent six months with one of the dhows sailing up and down the coast.

The sea was therefore more important to us Lamu people than the land in the interior. But the immediate hinterland was not simply a passive area. Cultivation and its products were essential to the Lamu economy.

My father later went inland (43 km – in a place which formerly was under the sultanate of Witu) where he established a ranch and a farm which he developed until his death. Some of his children are now based both in the farm – inland – and in Lamu facing the Ocean.

From this brief story – we draw several conclusions:-

- (i) Lamu's economy is dependent on the mainland, the entire coast, and Arabia/India;**
- (ii) Accompanying such economic linkages, are important networks of relationships most of which were social, kinship, cultural and intellectual/religious but also included political (in the wider sense) relationship;**
- (iii) These networks of relationships were spread all over - on the immediate mainland, the East African Coast, with Arabia and India. The South Arabian connection was mainly with Hadhramaut from where scholars, religious leaders, merchants, migrant settlers came from;**

7. In the past scholars have focused almost exclusively on the links between the EA Coast and the outside (Arabia, Persia and India). I would therefore *suggest* that one major concern of ZIORI could be to look at the neglected but very strong linkages between on the one hand the Coastal communities and the mainland, and on the other the linkages between the coastal communities along the entire coast. These links were political, economic, religious, intellectual, kinship and cultural in the wider sense. And most of these links still continue despite the division of the coastal communities into the newly created states dominated by mainlanders.

There are three other major issues which I would like to suggest that should be of concern to ZIORI.

FIRST

The Indian Ocean was surrounded by five major Civilisations – African, Arab-Persian, Hindu/Buddhist, Malayan and Chinese. For several millennium, extensive economic and socio-cultural ties were conducted peacefully – with no one cultural group trying to militarily conquer and dominate the Ocean lanes and emporiums. Indeed the Chinese had the military and technical capability to conquer large parts of the counties of the Indian Ocean, but did not do so. In 1421, a large Chinese fleet visited the West coast of India, the Arabian coast and the east African coast - to assure themselves that there was no major power which could threaten them. They were assured and they went back – leaving behind navigation pillars to help

sailors and which subsequently helped develop the longitudes we know it today. And international trade continued as well as a peaceful process of the spread of Islam in a large part of the Indian Ocean.

This model of peaceful international trade and civilisational interaction was broken up by the Europeans who used their military superiority to conquer land and dominate the Ocean. Can the old model be replicated in the Indian Ocean in this millennium – given the emergence of the Ocean as an Economic, technological and cultural power house.

SECOND

The process of Islamisation in the Indian Ocean was long and peaceful. In 1986, I did research on the role of the Hadhrami community in the Indian Ocean – from Arabia to East Africa, the littoral Islands, the West Coast of India,

Malaya and Indonesia. This particular group of people played a significant role in the process of Islamisation in the Indian Ocean, through their migration – intellectual/religious leaders, merchants and settlers. The Islamisation of the Indian Ocean is largely associated to and linked to this group of Hadhramis which, in my view, possessed what I call “the technology of social integration”. I therefore hope that ZIORI will take up this problematic for serious research since it contains all the elements of concern to ZIORI – migration, integration and participation in coastal communities, trade as well as intellectual and kinship linkages across the Indian Ocean.

THIRD

The Indian Ocean is now emerging as a major global economic, military and political arena where a struggle for its dominance is taking place. The significant economic role of major Indian Ocean powers is now universally acknowledged. However their eventual dominance of the world economy is a longer term process. In the meantime the global dominance of the Atlantic Ocean powers i.e. present Euro/American dominance of the world – is diminishing and waning. Hence the struggle for the immediate military dominance of the Indian Ocean is already taking place. The threats of war (America/Iran), the various alliances which are taking place - The Shanghai Group, the India Pakistan rapprochement, the China/India trade, technical and other agreements etc – all these are part of the

struggle for control of the Indian Ocean. The Atlantic powers want to dominate the Ocean while the Indian Ocean powers are trying to stop this move and at the same time develop their own model of Indian Ocean relationship based on a variation of the old mode - taking into account contemporary conditions.

However already this on-going struggle for domination of the Indian Ocean is affecting the African coastal communities. They are in turmoil – in the Red Sea, along the Somali Coast, the Kenya Coast, the Comoro Islands etc. Will this turmoil lead to major changes in coastal communities? Here we see mainland states playing a role in the wider Indian Ocean struggle between the Atlantic powers and the Indian Ocean powers! The coastal communities are thus divided and squeezed by the African states allied with the major Atlantic powers. At

the same time the enticement of these states by the emerging Indian Ocean powers is an indication of future potential restructuring of relations between Africa and the major Indian Ocean powers – Iran, India, Malaysia/Indonesia and China.

The contemporary situation of the coastal communities cannot thus be seen as simply marginal to the mainland states of which they are part - but must be seen in their critical position in the wider struggle for Indian Ocean dominance. In this struggle – the major Indian Ocean powers are trying to reassert their ownership of the Indian Ocean. Will the coastal communities play any role in this on-going cold-war conflict?

ZIORI should be interested in the effect of these larger processes and struggles on both the coastal communities as well as on the states of which they are part.

**I was given ten minutes to make a few remarks – but I
have taken much longer. My apologies.**

Thank you.