THE 'SIKU KUU' OF 1891

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Introduction

There are very few descriptions of late nineteenth century celebrations and festivities in Zanzibar. One of them is a hitherto unknown, short newspaper article entitled Ein Volksfest in Zanzibar. Der Siku kuu am 11, 12. und 13. Mai 1891 (A Popular Festival in Zanzibar. The Siku Kuu on the 11th, 12th and 13th May 1891). The article was written by an unknown correspondent for a popular German daily, the Berliner Tageblatt (Berlin Daily News) and was reprinted in a Catholic anti-slavery journal, named Gott will es (vol. 3, no. 14, 1891, pp. 426-33.) Apparently, before writing the article the author had spent a number of years in Zanzibar. His German is highly literary which suggest that he had received a good school education. However, it is impossible to say whether he was a ranking officer in the German colonial army, a colonial administrator or an employee of one of the German merchant houses in Zanzibar. The article is rather brief, consisting of less than 7 pages of text. However, despite its obvious limitations - the author, for instance, has next to nothing to say about the religious aspects of the celebrations - it is a useful historical source, because it contains a detailed eyewitness account of the siku kuu as it was celebrated in 1891.

The article opens with a brief account of the ceremonies following the sighting of the moon. The main body of the text describes in more detail what occurred on the next day. The morning was devoted to military parades and more or less light-hearted public displays of loyalty to the Sultan, but the afternoon and, especially the evening, were reserved for popular entertainment in an open space in the immediate vicinity of the town (i.e. Mnazi Moja). According to the author, in the afternoon large numbers of people visited the fair ground, mostly dressed in their best cloths, to buy sweets for children, eat snacks or to seek entertainment. However, the evening was largely reserved for adolescent youths - boys and girls/younger men and men and women - who participated in the dances (apparently ngoma) which were held at the ground. These dances lasted almost throughout the night! The article closes with a short description of a reception held by the Sultan of Zanzibar for European residents in Zanzibar which apparently was held the next morning.

The text largely speaks for itself, but one of the central themes in the article should be highlighted: This is the author's emphasis on the difference of the people who took part in the siku kuu celebrations of 1891. According to the author, for instance, each
'social', 'ethnic', and 'religious' group present in Zanzibar at the time had its own style of dress, its favoured food and drink, and perhaps also its preferred form of entertainment. However, this does not mean that the Sikukuu celebrations were simply a public display of Zanzibar's fractured diversity. Arguably, these festivities were at the same time also a show of Zanzibar's cultural unity, since these were not 'owned' by any particular group. Everybody, so it appears, including apparently even foreigners, like the author who wrote the article, could participate in the Sikukuu, and that is very different from the politics of exclusion which in a later period came to dominate Zanzibar's social life.

Finally, a note on terminology is necessary. I have translated the text as faithfully as possible to the German original. Thus, it contains phrases, which many today, including myself, find offensive, but this is the language used in historical documents at the time, which often is quite revealing in itself. Notes in square brackets are all by the editor.

A Popular Festival in Zanzibar

The Siku Kuu on the 11th, 12th and 13th May 1891
From the Correspondent Berliner Tageblatt

When at the end of Ramadan or the Month of Fasting, on Sunday, the 10th of May, at last the much-coveted small sickle of the new moon appeared, pandemonium truly broke loose in Zanzibar. The shooting of the Sultan's guns from his ships and of the Krupp guns, given to Sultan Bargash by Kaiser Wilhelm I, seemed not to come to an end. The big guns were located in the customs building, whose structures were not too solidly built. The Sultan's chief administrator of the Customs House suggested, after hearing the first shot, that he would be quite relieved if no accident would occur. Apparently, on such occasions there was the possibility that the building would gently collapse; moreover, it also happened quite often that the gun muzzles would explode due to overloading with gunpowder. Fortunately, no Europeans had come ever to grief on these occasions. The Baluchis fill their old muzzle-loaders half full with gun powder, sometimes one can also find small brass or iron pieces among the powder; as if they were possessed, they dance in circles and fire their guns, thereby giving little consideration to bystanders. When they fire their guns, the Baluchis leave the ramrod in the barrel, which quite frequently causes grief.
At the onset of dusk everybody quickly returns home for an elaborate feast. At the beginning starters are served, very similar to the Russian Sakuski [a Russian dish], the Wutki [an alcoholic drink] being replaced with coconut milk. On particular festive days the meal consists of various courses. In everyday life the inhabitants of Zanzibar eat quite frugally and often only once a day. But on Siku Kuu he indulges himself, feeling the need to make up for the 30-day fasting period. On offer are round pieces of liver and stripes of mutton fat, put alternately on a wooden skewer and roasted in charcoal ash. Better-off Arabs roast a whole lamb or a goat on the spit and send their European friends a succulent back or a joint. In addition, vegetables like bananas, tomatoes, egg plant, cucumber, sweet potatoes are cooked in mutton fat, and then - wrapped in large leaves - roasted in the ash; the customary rice seasoned with a hot curry and young fresh pepper is rarely missing. The end consists of cakes made from maize meal, grated coconut, and almonds with honey, which are roasted in mutton fat respectively fried in mutton fat. These cakes come in all sizes, colours and shapes, and are sprinkled with rose water. These cakes are quite heavy and doing Europeans no good. It is an old custom that on Siku Kuu the Sultan sends a large plate of such cakes to each European home. Many of us got stomach troubles from that.

During the current festival, there is little choice between fruits. However, the Zanzibar Orange is most delicious just right now, offering immense refreshment with a finely porous, hardly a millimetre thick skin. Pineapples are just beginning to ripen, but they are expensive: a big one, weighing a couple of pounds still costs ten Pesa, about twenty-five Pfennige, while later on only ten Pfennige are demanded for it. The excellent mango and all other fruits are only ripening after the rainy season.

The natives are fairly frugal with regard to beverages. Water and coffee, coconut milk, tea, an on festive day sherbet [chilled fruit juice]. It is only rarely that the Swahili consume spirits. Before the meal hands, and feet and the mouth are cleaned with water, likewise after the meal. In general, the natives wash their mouths after each meal, even if they had only some fruit.

Already in the early morning of the next day, shortly after six o'clock, the Sultan's army, led by the Goan music corps, marches in their best uniforms to the Sultan's palace, accompanied by willful street youths, who are more decorous in their manners than ours. While the Goan music corps were adorned with woodpecker green trousers with red stripes the day before, on this day, because of the heavy rain, they appeared in white, the Sultan's troops however [appeared] in navy blue jackets - some of which were missing buttons or were heavily worn, and - in order to preserve their shoes - bare-footed. While the Sultan's anthem was played, the gun shooting, rocket firing and the burning of fireworks started anew - although it is daylight. His Highness appears, accompanied by his dignitaries, on the balcony and the troops march by while presenting their guns. After the passing of the 'regular' troops, the irregulars or 'Kroibotos', [misprint for Kiswa his kiroboto pl. viroboto] in German the 'flea' appear, so called, because they jump back and forth like fleas. They are recruited from the riffraff of the islands of Zanzibar, Pemba, and Mafia, from the coast of Guardasii [Gaurdaffi on Somali coast?] down to the Rovuma, consisting of Baluchis, Hadrami people, the inhabitants of Oman.
Their age ranges between 12 and 70 years, and also cripples can be seen. With regard to the hairdresses one finds all varieties of hairstyles, from the closed cropped heads to long shoulder-falling locks. What they wear as their uniform is to the individual. Everybody wears the rags, which he possesses or which he has borrowed for the festivities. Likewise their arms, old Omani spears, swords, three or four centuries old, Muscat daggers, Dane guns, muzzle loaders, breech loaders of all ages and systems, Somali daggers, creases [south-east Asian daggers with wavy blades], shields [made] out of rhino, buffalo and zebra skin, powder boxes, made out of silver with gold inlays, or from buffalo horn, etc. etc. Some of these apparently poorly [dressed] 'warriors' own weapons and ornaments valued in hundreds of dollars; truly beautiful objects. However, they are not for sale. They have been in the possession of the family for centuries and were given from father to son; thus they are not sold out of deference; or some kind of magic is attributed to the ownership of the object.

About one hundred men each, led by a sheikh, march in short dancing steps, accompanied by the sound of drums, beaten with large sticks, and the blowing of war horns made out of ivory tusk or antelope horns, to the rectangular open space, which is limited on the one hand by the Sultan's palace and the sea, and on the other hand by the harem and the Customs House. The war drums and horns are accompanied by the singing of the whole troop - 'Allah, Allah il Allaaah' (sic). They balance their bodies in a swaying movement from foot to the other, while turning sideways with the upper torso, hither to the right, thither to the left. Thus this wild, frightening-looking horde pushes forward and backward, with increasing speed, more and more frantic gets the pace, more and more dazzling the strokes of the long Lamu sword into the air and to the ground by their leader, the fuses of their old muzzle loaders (they have no ammunition for other guns) are burning, the singing becomes louder and more fanatic, then everybody rushes forward with shouts and cries, more stomping than dancing, towards the palace and fire their guns partly into the air, partly into the ground, only to make place for the next detachment. Those who see this spectacle for the first time cannot avoid feeling a bit frightened in the midst of this wildly exited crowd. Yet after a while one becomes convinced that the whole spectacle was for show and that its only purpose was [to extract] a large gratuity from His Highness.

Two years ago we had to fight against such a troop. Yet only the Arabs maintained
a position. When Sadaani and Pangani were reoccupied, for instance, I had the opportunity to see how the Kirobots danced first on the beach, as if they intended to fight until the last man. However, as soon as we went into the water from our landing boats and, while still in the water up to our breasts, fired salvos on them, the ranks of the noble warriors became thin; when we reached the ground and attacked with Hurrah, they ran away. These are the 'volunteers' of His Highness.

The afternoon of the Siku Kuu is devoted to peaceful amusements. Everybody goes out to Ngambo, to Nasi Moya [sic] and to the Shambas, in open and closed carriages of all kind, on horses and donkeys, even on bi- and tricycles, a sport, which is practised already by semi well-off Hindu youths. The women of the Harem of rich Arabs and of Muslim Hindi travel in Landau carriages and Broughams. The windows are completely veiled with silken curtains, only occasionally one sees a fiery, deeply black pair of eyes twinkling behind the curtain, sometimes also a row of gleaming white teeth; they belong to the Hindi girl of about twelve to fifteen years. These carriages pass by in rapid trot. Servants sit beside the coachman and behind on the footboard, who keep a watchful eye so that their mistresses do not give a sign or a wink to a passer-by. Frequently, behind the coach of the women the owner of these oriental beauties sits in an open carriage. Only the women of the rich Parsees are driven around in the elegant silk and brocade dresses with unveiled faces in an open carriage.

It is difficult to describe the crowd. Europeans, Goans, Arabs, Hindus, Banyans, Malayans, some Chinese, Baluchis, Negroes throng towards the meadow on which carousels - each ride a Pesa [a coin of Indian origin current in Zanzibar] - have been erected for the natives. The customary clothing displays all the colours of the rainbow. The children, namely the Hindu, are richly attired with glitter finery. There are women with satin pink trousers and emerald green skirts, or with blue trousers and canary yellow satin skirts, with a violet headscarf, others are completely wrapped in white, golden interlaced garments, female Negroes with brightly printed leso, the cloth [khanga], which worn around the torso reaches up to the upper arms, on which on one finds peacocks, fishes and even elephants printed. The air is pregnant with the smell of oil-fried fish, meat, and other popular delicacies. In addition there is the hooting, horn blowing and yelling of the boys, on all sorts of musical instruments, the shouting of the donkey boys "Simile, Simile" ['make way'], the firework displays, the firing of old muzzle loaders, completely filled with gun powder, the cry of the female bread seller 'Mkate, Mka-a-a-te.' On the whole this is a decent affair. Drunks are only very rarely seen. A state of intoxication is more often reached by [participating in] long inciting dances,
which sometimes last throughout the night, then with the consumption of alcoholic beverages, such as millet beer or palm wine. Many of these dances are very graceful, namely when two younger Negro women perform a pas de deux. When the female dancers have danced themselves glowing hot and out of breath, two other ones replace them. Some of the bystanders receive from the female dancers, some of whom are very experienced, longing glances, but woe betides to the European who seeks to 'befriend' one of these beauties. He is utterly wrong, and it can happen to him that in order to avoid a good thrashing he has to rescue himself rapidly.

It is a common error, which newcomers easily harbour, to believe that female Negroes are easily approachable. The female Negro does not consort with the Musunugu [Sw. mzungu, pl. wazungu], the white man.

Exceptions are those women who have jobs as housekeepers, child minders, nurses, water carriers, or other employment with the Europeans; but they are mostly married and return to their huts in the evening.

Among the dances besides those already mentioned above are bell dances and round [group] dances. The bell dances are performed by men; three or four strong Negroes fasten bells of various materials, like iron, brass, copper, shells around both lower legs up to above the knee, and dance with them, moving in one line forward, backward and sideward to the sound of two drums which had been built from large tree trunks. On one side, these big drums are made out of whitely tanned stretched goatskin, but the opposite side is open. Now and then, the open side is placed on top of hot charcoal; occasionally hot pieces of charcoal are also put inside the drum. As a consequence the drying of the skin stretches the membrane even more tightly, with the result that the sound of the drum beats is enhanced. Of all the round or ring dances I will mention only the one which is danced by men. The drums and all other 'torture instruments' are in the middle of the circle; fifty to a hundred or even more Negroes are taking part in the dance. They leap from one foot to the other in a remarkably dexterous movement, accomplishing the most difficult movements of their hips, jiggling sometimes left, sometimes right around the circle, their bodies in close contact; suddenly turning towards the centre, stomping like zebras with their feet and singing a song about food, love or about any other indulgence of festive days. They dance faster and faster, turning ever more rapidly around themselves and in the circle, so that one could get crazy [watching it] - it is like a mill wheel is turning inside one's head.

Like every year at the end of Ramadan, thus also this year the whole European colony, each nation unto itself, has paid a visit to His Highness. Already at nine o'clock the British Consul appeared with the Vice-Consuls, the commander and the officers of the war ships, all in full formal dress in front of the palace. All the troops presented their arms when the British national anthem was played. After the British colony the Americans came to pay their respect, followed by the Germans. The German consular representative, Vice-Consul von Redwitz, and the Vice-Consul Count von Buri, escorted by the consular interpreter Dr Reichard, were accompanied by the Commander and officers of the Cruiser 'Schwalbe', by the greater part of the resident German merchant [community], by the officials of the German East Africa Company, by a number of ship
captains and some German 'world travellers', a species who lately seems to have become more numerous. The Vice-Consul came in his Bavarian infantry uniform. At their arrival at the palace the Prussian national anthem was played.

At the top end of the long hall of mirrors the Sultan takes seat on his gold throne, closely before him the Consul and the officers, who are accompanied by the civilians: on the other side Arab aristocrats and Muslim Hindus take their place, behind the Sultan his dignitaries arrange themselves. Immediately dozens of servants appear with coffee in small Mocha cups, others with Arab sweets, which had been fried in mutton fat; servants bringing chilled sherbet follow them. Then one of the Sultan's head servant sprinkles the handkerchiefs of the Europeans with strongly redolent rose oil; the Sultan gets up, accompanies the procession, in the forefront the officials, to the staircase and shakes hands with every European with a friendly 'Koheri' [Sw. kwaheri] (adieu). Leaving the palace, again the Prussian national anthem is played and the troops present their arms.

Barely have the Europeans reached their homes and got out of their uncomfortable formal dress, the tailcoat, servants of the Sultan appear with mighty trays, on which half a dozen or even more plates with sweets are arranged. Because this fine foodstuff is doing the same to the European stomach as if one eats fresh Rhine salmon with cucumber salad at midnight which is topped up with plum pudding - as one finds at the English Christmas supper - it is quickly put into the possession of the black servants, who take it to their wives.

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