INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Tanzania: No Answers

Makoko Center
Musoma, Tanzania
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Dear Peter,

In this part of Tanzania--the northwest, bordering Lake Victoria and just south of Kenya--young women are coming in from the villages to form liaisons with men in town. They are known as soap-girls, because that is what they have come for. Soap is scarce in the towns and cities, it is practically non-existent in the countryside. As with most of Tanzania's problems, no one reason can be given for the soap shortage. The country lacks the foreign exchange to buy raw materials for the soap factories. Distribution of the soap that is made is hampered by the usual transportation problems of poor African countries. Dirt roads are almost impassable now, in the rainy season. Gas is expensive and in short supply. Spare parts are hard to get, so truck drivers and bus operators refuse to travel over the worst roads, leaving some areas without any regular means of transport. Lastly, the soap that does get through is hoarded, sold secretly at outrageous prices or given in exchange for other valuable items or for special services. And so we have the soap-girls.

From the few opportunities I get to read the foreign press, I have the impression that Tanzania has come under a lot of scrutiny lately, and the consensus is that this country's 15-year-old policy of moderate socialism is a failure. While Tanzania could never be called a success, I detect a flock instinct, like vultures descending on a carcass, which overpowers objectivity. A wire service correspondent I talked with in Zimbabwe insisted that Tanzania had the worst record of any African nation. Such an assessment shows extreme ignorance or extreme prejudice. Ghana and Uganda have suffered political turmoil as well as economic collapse, while Tanzania has remained relatively peaceful. Ghana and Uganda also had much more going for them at independence in the way of natural resources and infrastuctural development. Winston Churchill called Uganda "the pearl of Africa", and Ghana well deserved its colonial name--the Gold Coast. To suggest that Tanzania's troubles are worse than the tragic histories of those two nations is nonsense.

Critics attack Tanzania from both sides. Conservatives point to the higher standard of living in capitalist Kenya. That country, however, benefited from much greater British investment during colonial rule. Tanzania was essentially ignored. Some people say that Kenya, for all its apparent wealth, has shown less development since independence than Tanzania. Food expert Frances Moore Lappé, for example, has pointed out that, while

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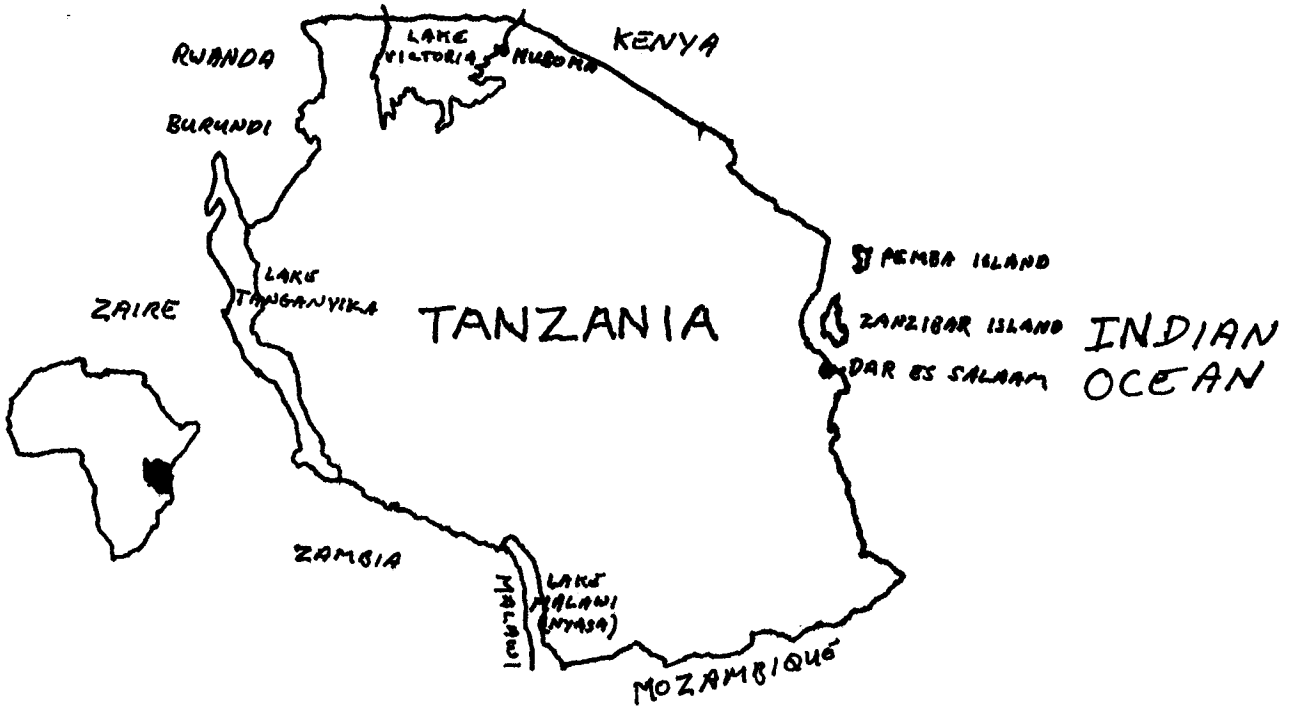
food production per capita had fallen 9 percent in Tanzania from 1969-71 to 1978, Kenya sustained a greater drop in that index. She is sympathetic to socialism and neglects to add that Kenya has one of the highest rates of population growth in the world.



Radicals, on the other hand, tend to prefer the revolutionary fervor of marxist Mozambique, Tanzania's southern neighbor, to Tanzania's mild socialism. Lappé, for instance, in a comparative study of the two countries (Mozambique and Tanzania: Asking the Big Questions, Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1980), shows marked preference for Mozambique's style of socialism. Yet when Mozambican President Samora Machel visited Tanzania for this country's independence celebrations this year, he told the crowd that his countrymen suffer much greater shortages than the Tanzanians do.

Tanzania's supporters cite its high adult literacy rate, large primary school enrollment and elaborate system of health care as examples of the country's progress since independence. This argument, too, must be greeted with caution. Although its primary school enrollment is high (67 percent in 1975--World Bank), Tanzania hasn't solved the problem of an inappropriate educational curriculum inherited from the colonial powers that makes frustrated societal misfits of primary school graduates. The country's efficient hierarchy of health care centers doesn't do much good when medicines are lacking because of the scarcity of foreign currency.

Lots of excuses can be made for Tanzania's troubles, but beyond the excuses is a sense of futility. The country had food shortages last year partially because of drought, but the people in this region waited for the rain and went hungry like everyone else, with a seemingly endless expanse of water next to them. I met two men who are working on an irrigation project here. They despair of getting the local people to follow their example, or even keep the project going when they leave, though it is designed for local conditions and available materials. Who knows why some peoples discovered irrigation thousands of years ago and others refuse it when it is offered to them? Some of the country's difficulties can be blamed on the neglect of

the British. They built few paved roads, for instance. After twenty-one years of independence, the asphalt has been scraped off some roads because dirt roads don't get potholes. Such is development in Tanzania. Initiating its socialist policy in 1967, the government called for national self-reliance. Today, it receives more foreign aid than ever, and is among the highest aid-per-capita recipients in the world.

Still, I can't say what country has clearly done a better job of development. Most of the differences between countries can be accounted for by historical or natural distinctions. The Ivory Coast, one of the wealthiest African countries in per-capita terms, benefited from a small population and the fertility of its soil. The country took advantage of impoverished migrant labor from drought-ridden Upper Volta to the north to power its economic growth. Population pressure may slow down or reverse that growth. The capital, Abidjan, shows signs of strain in infrastructural breakdowns and rising crime. Life appears no better for the majority of people who live there than it is for the Tanzanians in Dar-es-Salaam, this country's capital. Life is very much worse in Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, which is the wealthiest black African nation in absolute terms. Nor does Tanzanian village life seem much better or worse than rural living in either of these other countries, despite their governments' different approaches to development. Everywhere, most Africans live in mud huts, drink unclean water, have poor diets and receive little medical care. Variations depend mostly on the physical environment or on fortuitousness rather than on political ideologies.

Saying that socialized agriculture doesn't work is easy. Determining what will work is much harder. Capitalists say Tanzania can't feed itself because of its state farms and cooperative villages. Socialists say the country hasn't gone far enough. They criticize the government for allowing privately owned estates for export crops and family farming plots. Kenya is one of the few African countries that has allowed individual ownership of land, resulting in large property holdings and the creation of a landless class. Some people think that this development portends more trouble for the Kenya government than Tanzania's poverty does for its government. Despite the scarcity of soap and other material goods, the Tanzanians I've met don't seem terribly discontented, and they don't envy their northern neighbors at all. I think this should be remembered when one is tempted to call Tanzania a failure.

I have spent much time among missionaries lately, and recently I heard a talk by a Roman Catholic priest given as part of a cultural orientation course for new missionaries. His anecdotes shed light on the local culture and displayed an enlightened approach to apostolic Christianity, and I would like to share a couple of them.

Traditional Bantu belief maintains that human life is a cycle with six stages: pre-birth, adolescence, adulthood, old age, living death (remembered ancestors) and dead death (forgotten ancestors). To this cycle, the people in the priest's area add a seventh stage for very old men considered to be between life and death. They are called wasubi and are the spiritual leaders of the tribe. Actually, this is an elite class, membership of which requires a great deal of wealth as cattle must be given to the relatives of a man's wives.

Tribal Christians had never become wasubi because the initiation ceremony involved witchcraft. One man who had made all the preparations for the ceremony became ill and converted to Christianity on what was believed to be

his death bed, but he recovered and came to the priest with his predicament. His conversion was genuine and he had no intention of going against the dictates of the Church, but he had gone to great expense to prepare for the wasubi ceremony and wondered if somehow he could go through with it.

The priest investigated the ceremony and, with the aid of the tribe's Christian elders, devised a ceremony in keeping with the Church's beliefs. His philosophy is that forbidden practices should not be simply discarded but replaced with something good. So he sprinkled holy water on the paths leading to the site of the ceremony to replace the traditional medicine put there to kill any guest with evil intentions. A mass took the place of the sacrifice of a cow to the ancestors. The priest felt he could leave in the part where all the guests marched around a tree, but the Christian elders insisted that be changed because the tree was full of spirits. So the guests marched around the initiate's compound.

Despite these changes, the elders felt the priest was taking a great risk because at every wasubi ceremony a guest mysteriously died. It would have done the Church no good to be linked to such a sinister event, but the ceremony passed without a casualty. The next test was whether the new msubi would be accepted by the other wasubi. Not only was he accepted, but every subsequent wasubi ceremony followed the Christian procedure, although only three more Christians have become wasubi. At the fifty to sixty ceremonies held in the new way, no guest has died.

The priest told an even stranger tale of a Christian whose wife had not had a baby after many years of marriage. At the man's request, the priest sent her to a hospital for examination, which determined that she couldn't have children. A few months later, the woman came to the priest's house at night saying her husband was sick. The priest went to her hut in the company of a catechumen who had been visiting him, a strapping fellow. The priest found the sick man standing naked in the middle of the hut. "Give me a son," the man cried, and he attacked the priest, sending him sprawling.

The catechumen subdued the crazed husband and he was sent to a mental hospital. When he returned four months later, he was presumed cured. One day, years later, the man came to the priest's home. The priest's father had died in the interim, and the husband said he had been praying to the dead man to help him get a son. Now, the man said, his prayer had been answered. His wife was three months pregnant and he wanted permission to name the child after the priest's father. Fearful for the man's sanity, the priest gave his permission and asked to see the wife, whom he sent to the hospital for an examination. She was indeed three months pregnant. She gave birth to a boy, who was duly named after the priest's father.

Another woman, who had given birth to a dozen girls, asked for the priest's help in getting a son. Together they prayed to his father, and her next child was a boy, again named after the dead man. One day the infant was very sick and the priest took him and the mother to the hospital. Looking down at the infant in the mother's arms, with its hairless, wrinkled face and shriveled, toothless mouth, the priest thought it even looked like his old man.

The priest said he now prays regularly to his father.

Regards,

Bowden

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