

Zanzibar

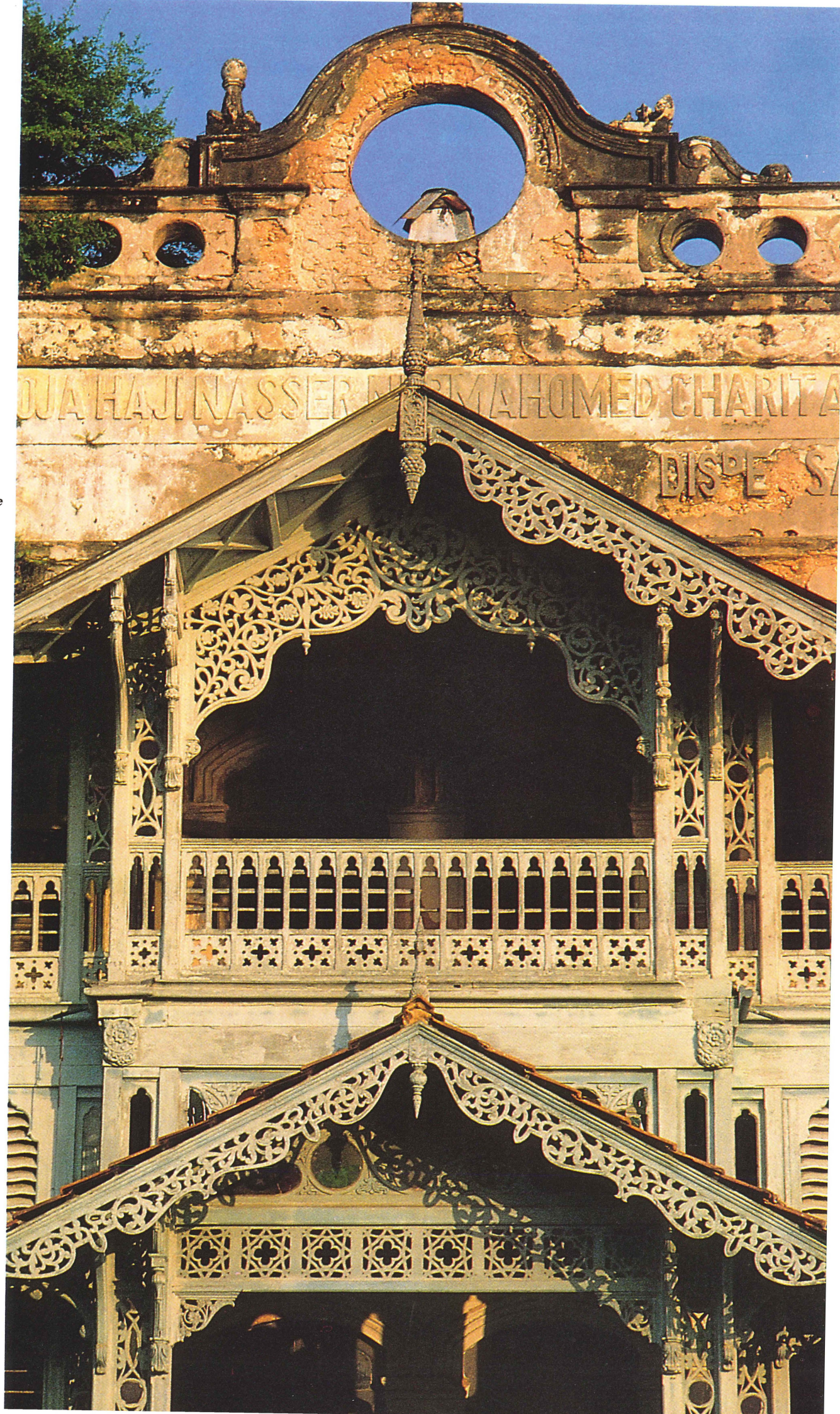
Zanzibar is an island in the Indian Ocean, located 40 miles off the east coast of Africa (approximately 30 degrees longitude and 6 degrees latitude). As it is south of the Equator and in the path of the trade winds, it receives heavy rainfall throughout the year, with an average temperature of 80° Fahrenheit. While agriculture is the main economic activity, production is a mixture of cash and subsistence crops; two principal cash crops are coconuts and cloves for which Zanzibar has become famous since the early 19th century when the French brought it to the Reunion and Mauritius and it then came to island. Politically, Zanzibar is a Socialist Republic since 1964 but attached to Tanzania on the African mainland just opposite.

However, Zanzibar is remarkable culturally for its mixture of peoples, Africans, Indians, Europeans, but particularly the Arab traders who settled there over many centuries. From the 18th century onwards, Zanzibar was ruled by Sultans originally from Oman on the Arabian peninsula; it was they who developed the island's commercial importance by dealing in ivory and slaves as well as the above-mentioned cloves and coconuts. The presence of Islam is very strong on the island as a result. This is reflected in architectural heritage of Zanzibar, with a number of stylistic features whose origin can be traced to Oman, Hadramout (Yemen, see MIMAR 18), and other regions of Arabia. Massive wooden doorways with ornate carvings are one example of this phenomenon, as are the shuttered, projecting wooden balconies on the facades of tall masonry buildings. The crenellation on the fortified structures which remain also reflects Arab influences. It is this mingling of many races and cultures on Zanzibar which has resulted in a colourful, picturesque architecture.

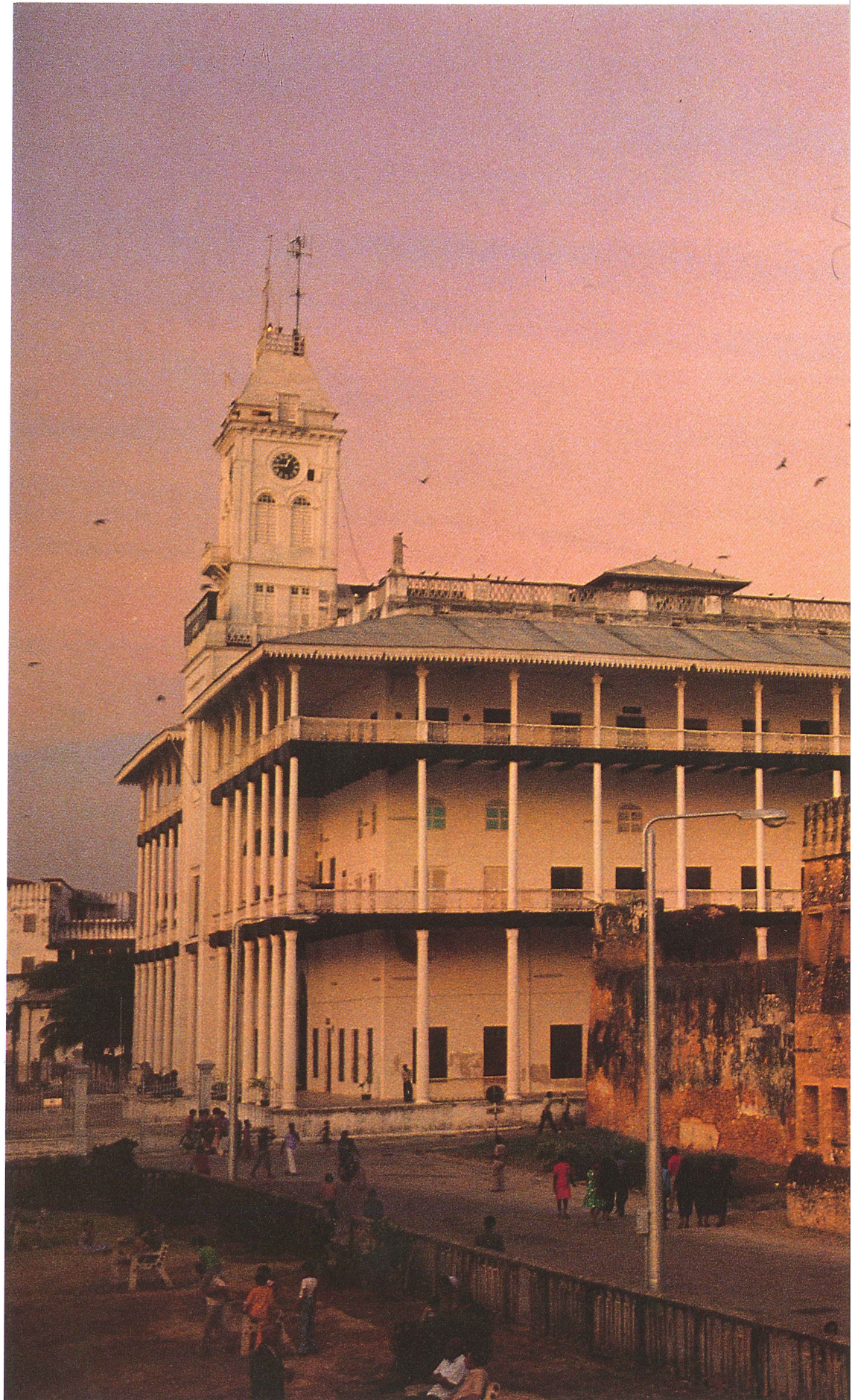
Photographs by Arthur Thévenart



Left and right:
The Nasser
Murmahomed
Dispensary was
built by an
influential Ismaili
from India, Sir
Tharia Topan. The
cornerstone of the
edifice was laid
during the Jubilee
year of Queen
Victoria of Great
Britain.
Particularly
noteworthy is the
highly ornate,
curved wooden
balustrades and
decoration of the
verandahs — some
of which is clearly
inspired from
Indian motifs. It is
presently used as
private dwellings.



The Beit el Ajaib. The Palace of Marvels (left) and the old Arab fort (right) in Zanzibar. Plans for the Palace, constructed in 1883, were supposedly drawn up by an engineer of the Royal Navy for Sultan Seyyid Bargash (1870-1888) who wanted an imposing edifice for official ceremonies. The Arab fort, on the other hand, is much older and located on the former site of a Portuguese church. Dating from 1710 it housed the garrison defending the town of Zanzibar.





MIMAR GALLERY

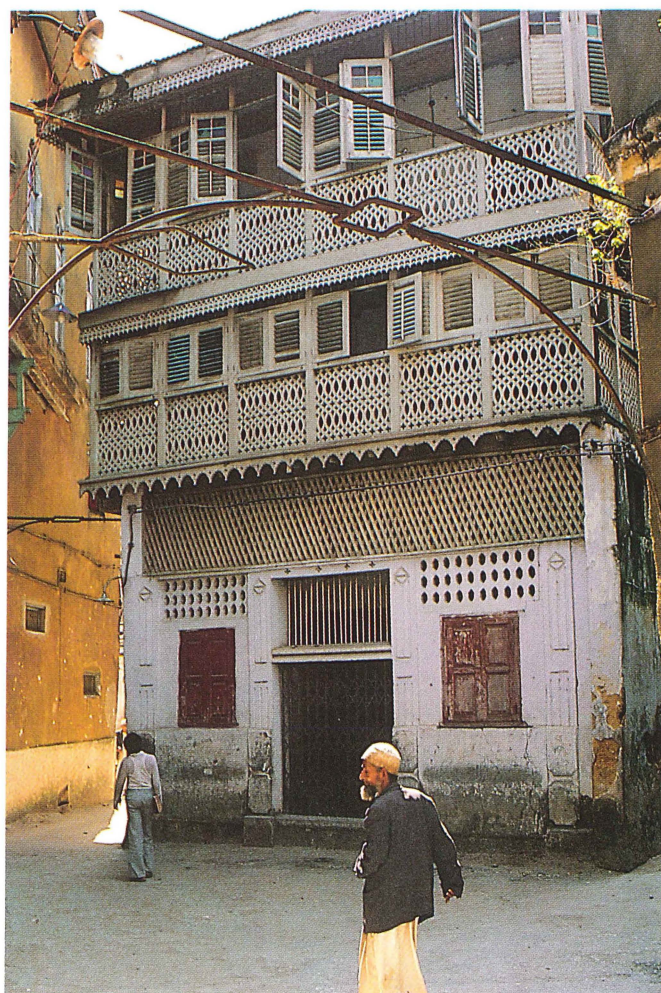
A palatial villa of reinforced concrete was erected in the 1920's within a garden which also has a small private mosque.



Left: Most of the bungalows or villas of the rich had verandahs outside of rooms, which provided shade and allowed one to be out of doors without leaving the house — a definite advantage in a tropical climate. This verandah belongs in fact to the director's house on Prison Island, just off Zanzibar, constructed for runaway slaves but apparently never used ...



Right: A typical urban dwelling in 19th century Zanzibar, decorated with carved wooden balustrades and shutters.



Right: Door to the house of Tipoo Tib, a famous ivory and slave trader who became extremely rich and powerful in Zanzibar.

Right, below: Wooden doors in Zanzibar, often of teak, sesame or other hard wood resistant to termites, vary in their decorative vocabulary. Some are sculpted with animal or floral motifs or have inscriptions from the Koran on the lintel above the doorway. The symbolism expressed is intended to bring good fortune to the household: the lotus flower is associated with reproduction, the fish perhaps with Artagatiz, the ancient Syrian goddess of fertility, the date tree with abundance, etc.

