



Between a desire for cooperation and imperial rivalry: the German, Indo-British and French post offices in Zanzibar (1875–1904)

Camille Avrillas (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France)

Between 1875 and 1890, three post offices – a British office managed by the Indian post office from 1875 to 1895, and thereafter directly by the colonial authorities; a French office in 1889; and a German office in 1890 – opened in the port city of Zanzibar. This state was founded by the division of the Sultanate of Oman and Zanzibar following the dynastic crisis caused by the death of Said bin Sultan (1804–1856), the ruler of Oman, who had extended his power along the east coast of Africa between 1810 and his death in 1856. This division was the product of arbitration and British interference, recognized by a Franco-British treaty, the Treaty of Paris, in 1862.

When the three post offices opened, the sultanate already lay at the heart of European imperial rivalries. The British, who had already gained a foothold in the entourage of Sultans Majid bin Said (1856–1870) and Barghash bin Said (1870–1888) in the 1860s, saw the German explorers Carl Peters (1856–1918), Clemens Denhardt (1852–1929), and Gustav Denhardt (1856–1917) establish two protectorates in 1884/1885: one in the interior of the Mrima Coast, the coast directly facing the island of Zanzibar, where the sultan enjoyed most power, and one in the Sultanate of Witu, not far from the port city of Lamu, where Germans opened a post office shortly afterwards. The British countered by also establishing a protectorate in Mombasa. It was also the British who obtained protectorship over the sultanate itself following the Heligoland–Zanzibar Treaty in 1890, signed by Germany and the United Kingdom.

As for the French, their influence was less, but it was not absent: they had a consulate as well as trading houses and missionaries. Above all, the presence of French interests was an argument for France to counterbalance the presence of British interests in an area of interest to French colonial advocates: Madagascar. The opening of these offices should also be seen in the broader context of the expansion of Western postal networks around the world, as well as postal practices such as postcards or the use of stamps. Between 1889 and 1904, the Post became the focus of rivalries between the British, Germans and French in Zanzibar as a result of their colonial control of the western Indian Ocean. These rivalries also played out in the wider context of the Universal Postal Union. They served the interests of users, since behind the rivalry between states there lay a financial rivalry that made quality of service just as important.

So, we will ask to what extent the period of the Scramble for Africa was a challenge for the Postal Union, one that was resolved between the nations concerned, but in which the UPU was a tool of pressure between states and also an agent of “postal” globalization. To answer this question, we have drawn on French and British diplomatic and consular sources and, to a lesser extent, private sources.