

Survival Strategies among the Nyamwezi Migrant Laborers in Zanzibar: The Symbolism of “Majembe ya Kinyamwezi” and the Social Function of “Fogongh'o”, 1890s-1950s

Mikidadi Hamisi Alawi*

Faculty of Education, Department of Education in Social Sciences, Catholic University of Mbeya,
Mbeya, Tanzania

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10200299>

Received: 19 February 2026; Accepted: 25 February 2026; Published: 06 March 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Nyamwezi migration to Zanzibar between the 1890s and 1950s and their life experiences. It primarily concentrates on two cultural traditions that were very important: the "fogongh'o" system, where everyone came together to assist one another, and farming with “majembe ya Kinyamwezi”, which are special Nyamwezi hoes. The paper looked into historical narratives and archival records to find out that “majembe ya Kinyamwezi” were not merely farming equipment. They really showed what people were like and how they made a living when Zanzibar was under colonial rule, with a plantation economy. "Fogongh'o" was like a backup plan for people who were new to the area and needed help with hard social issues, like someone dying, getting sick, or even getting married. People helped each other, and just having that community support made it all possible. This paper examines how Nyamwezi migrants navigated challenging times during colonial rule, when they were exploited as laborers and marginalized on the periphery of society. It really goes into detail about the working tools they used and the social ways they interacted with each other to survive. These new findings significantly enhance our understanding of several key issues: the impact of labor on post-slavery society, the adaptation of migrants to new environments, and the preservation of cultural traditions in the face of colonial influences. This study shows that the Nyamwezi migrants were able to survive by following their customs and working together.

Keywords: Nyamwezi, labor, migrant, colonial, survival strategies, “fogongh'o,” and majembe

INTRODUCTION

The Nyamwezi's migration from the interior of what is now Tanzania to Zanzibar in the late 1800s and early 1900s changed the history of labor in East Africa at a significant pace. The East African slave trade began to decline in the 1890s, prompting numerous Nyamwezi to seek employment on Zanzibar's clove plantations and within its urban areas. They entered a colonial labor market that was based on race, wage labor, and few social protections (Sheriff, 1987; Cooper, 1980). The Nyamwezi were trying to survive in a situation where they were being pushed to the edges of society and were doing well economically. This migration was not just about moving to a new place; it was also about adapting to new social, economic, and cultural conditions.

To stay alive, they needed both material and social strategies that connected their cultural identity to their economic needs. The “majembe ya Kinyamwezi”, or the Nyamwezi hoes, are a well-known example of this. They were used for more than just farming. Interviews conducted in Zanzibar and Nzega indicated that many Nyamwezi farmers and weeders still employed these hoes, which featured distinctive design attributes that set them apart from those of other ethnic groups (Respondent, 2025). The name and continued use of “majembe ya Kinyamwezi” showed a link to ancestral farming knowledge and a form of cultural strength. These hoes made it easier for people to work in different areas of labor. This meant that migrants could do wage work on plantations and subsistence farming at the same time, which made them less dependent on colonial employers (Iliffe, 1979; Glassman, 2011).

In addition to changing materials, the Nyamwezi groups in Zanzibar started a monthly contribution plan called "fogongh'o." This plan made an informal social security network that pooled resources to help members during important social events like sickness, death, and marriage. Field data indicated that "fogongh'o" was crucial in mitigating the social and economic risks faced by migrants lacking formal welfare systems during colonial governance (Interview, 2025). The practice reinforced community solidarity and moral obligations, allowing Nyamwezi migrants to maintain social cohesion and collective identity within an urban and ethnically diverse setting (Feierman, 1990).

The "majembe ya Kinyamwez'i and "fogongh'o" together show how Nyamwezi migrants were able to survive in Zanzibar's colonial plantation economy by keeping some of their old ways while also adapting to new ones. These practices illustrate predominant trends in post-slavery African labor adaptation, in which migrants utilized both material culture and social organization to maneuver through the oppressive structures of colonial labor systems (Cooper, 1980; Sheriff, 1987). This study elucidates migrant resilience and cultural agency within the framework of colonial exploitation by highlighting survival strategies.

Theoretical Framework

This study looks at a few linked ideas to understand how the Nyamwezi migrant laborers in Zanzibar manage to survive. The study really focuses on their cultural identity, how they adapt to work, and how they organize themselves as a group. These frameworks assist the study in situating the findings within broader scholarly discourses concerning African civilizations post-slavery, migrant labor, and the informal economy.

Social Capital and Collective Action

This research is based on the concept of social capital—networks of relationships that enable people to work together for mutual benefit. Social capital refers to the value found in these social relationships. The Nyamwezi and other migrant groups use social capital through ethnic associations (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998). For instance, "fogongh'o" serves as a safety net against economic shocks caused by sickness, death, or marriage. Social capital theories are widely used in Africa to analyze social protection strategies and survival tactics (Berry, 1993; Granovetter, 1985). These studies show how migrants use shared ethnic backgrounds to address deficiencies in formal welfare systems. An important aspect is recognizing how social identity shapes economic support networks.

Moral Economy and Informal Social Security

Moral economy serves as a complementary concept to social capital, providing an analytical framework for examining the influence of economic actions in relation to shared values and cultural norms (Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1991). In the context of economic marginalization and labor exploitation, employing moral economy as an analytical framework illustrates how societies can counteract fragmented market logic through mutual reciprocity and collective responsibilities. In this study, "fogongh'o" serves as a paradigm of moral economy, wherein sharing is perceived not as a transactional mechanism of economic compensation but as a collective dedication to community and shared values. This contradicts established economic theories by failing to recognize the importance of social and moral welfare as indicators of economic success, rather than merely individual profit and wealth accumulation (Feierman, 1990).

Labor Adaptation and Post-Slavery Transitions

When looking at East Africa after slavery, it should be reconsidered how people changed their jobs and their communities. Scholars have found that former slaves and laborers dealt with tough situations as they tried to gain freedom, figure out who they were, and stay alive under colonial rule (Cooper, 1980; Lovejoy, 2011). This study indicates that survival necessitated both practical adaptations, exemplified by the utilization of essential tools like the majembe ya Kinyamwezi, and the development of social strategies, such as the formation of groups. The tools and objects that people used had symbolic meaning and helped workers stay connected to their old lives as they learned how to work for pay in the colonies (Iliffe, 1979; Glassman, 2011).

Linking Theory to Empirical Findings

These theories helped to understand how the Nyamwezi migrant laborers dealt with entwined substantial and social survival strategies. Fogongh'o is a good example of how they used community help and a sense of fairness to help each other and make their values stronger. "majembe ya Kinyamwez"i also shows how they changed their tools and kept their traditions alive, which allowed them work in different ways. This study shows how the Nyamwezi migrant laborers were able to take charge and bounce back by looking at these practices through the lens of community support, moral principles, and adapting to work. They had a hard time in the colonial plantation system, but they did not lose their identity. This study examines the Nyamwezi survival strategies as central to culture, economics, and community. It shows in great detail how migrant laborers took charge and showed strength, even though the colonial system was against them.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative study to find out how the Nyamwezi migrant laborers lived in Zanzibar from the 1890s to the 1950s. This was really meant to understand how they lived their lives every day, what their culture was like, and how they set things up. The author interviewed people and looked at archival accounts. This helped understand their tools and social activities like the "majembe ya Kinyamwez"i and fogongh'o.

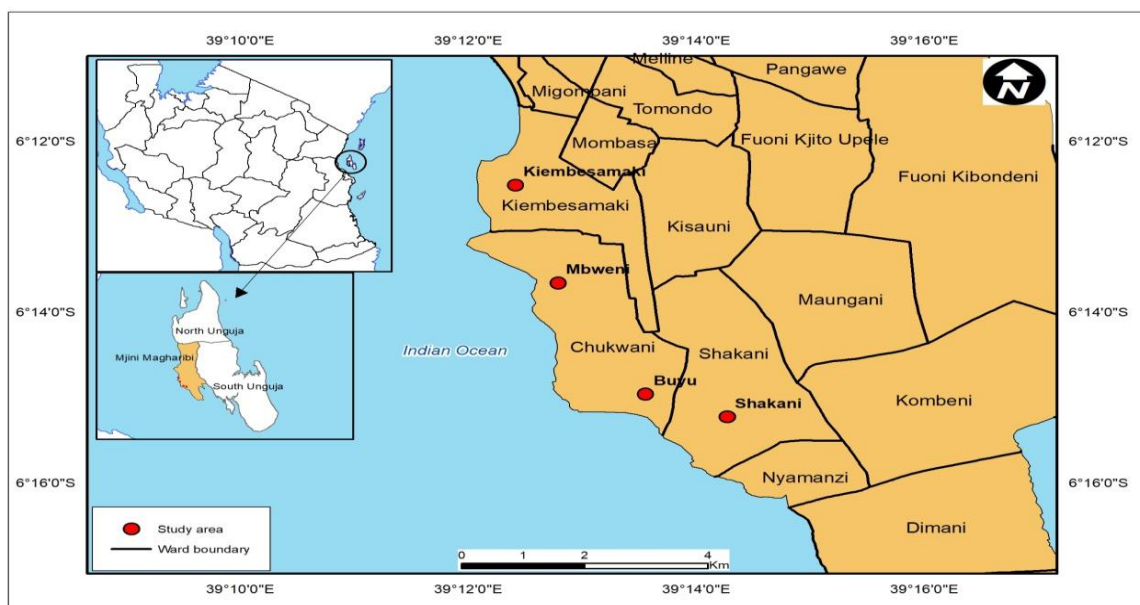
Sampling Technique: Linear Snowball Sampling

The study employed a snowball sampling strategy to discover people for this study and invite them to the interview. This method works effectively when one wants to investigate groups that are hard to get to or when trust is really crucial. It began with one person who was known in Zanzibar, and he then referred to talk to the next, and so on. It was like following a chain to find enough individuals to interview. The study chose this strategy since the Nyamwezi migrant laborers in Zanzibar were spread out, yet still very close to each other. With snowball sampling, the author could keep the interviews on track and gain the community's trust.

Respondent Categories

The author chose people to answer the questions in the study who had diverse opinions that were significant for what the study aimed to find out. This included older persons and community leaders who knew a lot about the Nyamwezi's history, culture, and way of life. The writer also talked to persons in Zanzibar who were in fogongh'o savings organizations and those who were members and organizers of the Nyamwezi groups. People from Shakani, Kiembesamaki, Buyu, and Mbwani are here. The map below illustrates where these places are:

Figure: 1 Map of Zanzibar showing the study areas



Source: Dar es Saam University, Geography Department, map Laboratory unit, 2025

Data Analysis

The paper employed thematic analysis to identify patterns within the qualitative data. It examined the transcripts and employed an inductive methodology to identify prevalent themes. The paper focused on things like how people survived, what different cultural symbols meant, how social networks affected things, and how people changed their work. The paper looked at what people said in interviews and then compared that to old records. It made the results much stronger and gave a more complete picture. Agricultural laborers and cultivators used Kinyamwezi hoes every day, which tells us something about the equipment they used and how they worked.

Ethical Considerations

When the researcher thinks about ethics, he is really just being aware of how his actions might hurt other people. It is about taking a moment to think about all the different points of view and making decisions that are fair and right for everyone.

The author made sure that everyone who took part gave their informed consent after getting permission from the authority. He also told them that everything they said would be kept private and that they could leave the study at any time. The author was very careful to respect the cultures of the people he worked with and made sure that the information they got was only used for research purposes. He could only face so much, but he found ways to get around it.

Limitations and Mitigation

The linear snowball sampling method worked really well for finding people who are hard to reach. But there's a downside: since participants refer each other, he might end up with a biased sample, which makes it harder to say our findings apply to everyone. To deal with this, the study made sure to get answers from a wide range of people at first and then checked the facts across all the groups that answered. The author got around language problems by hiring local interpreters who were very good at their Nyamwezi dialects.

Data Collection Methods

The author obtained the data from interviews, observations, and old records. The author conducted in-person interviews with individuals across various selected regions in Zanzibar. He asked them when they moved there, how they used and what they meant by “majembe ya Kinyamwezi”, fogongh'o stuff, and any problems they had. The author attended meetings and parties where fogongh'o practices occurred. This helped the author understand how people worked together and followed their rituals. The author used archival documents to look at old papers and records from the Zanzibar National Archives. This helped him see how the Nyamwezi workers changed over time. With permission, all interviews were recorded. This helped put together information and gained a better idea of how they made it in terms of community and resources.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Majembe ya Kinyamwezi: Agricultural Tools as Cultural Symbols and Economic Instruments

A wise person once said with great passion, "You see, these hoes are not just simple tools we use in the fields." They are much more than that. I feel like I'm holding a piece of our past when I hold my “majembe”. It makes me feel close to my father, grandfather, and the generations before them who worked the land in Tabora, where I grew up. This house makes me think of who we are, even though we don't live there anymore. I feel like I'm part of something bigger than just my work. It keeps our traditions alive and makes us happy. (Shakani 2025, Respondent 12)

This story makes it very clear that the “majembe” are the ones who keep culture and identity alive. These hoes have a practical use, but they also remind people of continuity and give them a sense of strength and belonging, even though they have moved. Iliffe's (1979) ideas about how material culture helps immigrants

stay true to themselves are important to this. They show how music can be important to a culture and help people stay close to each other.

A younger worker on the Buyu farm also talked about how the “majembe” is useful in real life. "I've used a lot of different hoes at work here, but the “majembe ya Kinyamwez”i is different," he said. It fits my hand perfectly, and the way it is shaped makes it easier to dig in the dirt than other tools. Our dads showed us how to make things that are both strong and light. This helps me stay awake longer while I work. "I need these hoes to help me take better care of my little farm because the money I make from odd jobs isn't always enough to support my family" (Respondent 18 Buyu, 2025).

This testimony talks about how the hoe is made to be easy to use and how it can help people who farm for a living. Cooper's (1980) study shows how African immigrants made a living by working on colonial farms and doing traditional farming. The “majembe” is a great example of how culture and business can work together.

Colonial agricultural reports support these firsthand accounts: the Nyamwezi migrant workers are known for their ongoing participation in subsistence farming, often using their own traditional hoes, which are very different from the tools used by other ethnic groups. "This two-job system is a good way to deal with unfair pay and make sure there is enough food (Zanzibar Agricultural Department, 1935).

Archival data corroborates the lived experiences of migrants and the assertion that “majembe ya Kinyamwez”i served as both functional implements and emblems of resistance to complete assimilation into the colonial wage system. According to Glassman (2011), this material culture is a way for people who move to show that they are free and keep their culture alive.

“fogongh’o,” Collective Contributions as Informal Social Security

A leader in Mbweni who thought carefully about how "fogongh'o" helps lower social risks says that the Nyamwezi community here sees it as more than just a monthly payment. We promise that no one will have to deal with problems on their own. People use the money they get from "fogongh'o" to pay for the funeral or hospital bills of someone who is sick and can not work, or someone in their family has died. We live far away from Nzega, but it's important to show that we are a family. Money is important too. We can keep going because we all have a role to play, and we have hope and strength. (Mbweni, 2025; Respondent 21) This description illustrates how "fogongh'o" functions as a social adhesive and an informal welfare system that fosters trust and mutual concern. Putnam's (1993) social capital paradigm elucidates the mechanisms through which cooperative risk-sharing can occur in the absence of formal safety nets.

A woman who is a member of Shakani said that "fogongh'o" helped her through important times in her life. "I didn't have a lot of money saved up, so I was worried about the bills when I got married last year," she said." The 'fogongh'o' group, on the other hand, came to my rescue. Everyone gave what they could, and together we were able to pay for the ceremony. It made me happy to know that my new family had grown and that I was loved. This is how we take care of each other; it's a tradition that helps us through hard times. (Shakani, 2025; Respondent 26) This first-person account illustrates how "fogongh'o," which transcends crisis management to foster social cohesion during prosperous times, reflects the principles of moral economy, wherein commercial transactions are linked to ethical obligations (Scott, 1976; Feerman, 1990).

People gathered in a common hall for an observed association meeting, where they took turns talking about the issues people face and how to fix them. People felt like they had a lot of responsibility as a group. These ceremonies make the plan feel more real and help the group feel like they belong by putting "fogongh'o" into a moral framework that everyone can understand. The performative aspect of contribution ceremonies enhances social capital and sustains the network's resilience (Woolcock, 1998).

Interconnection Between Material and Social Strategies

A middle-aged farmer in Buyu said, "The hoe helps me feed my family; 'fogongh'o' helps when problems come." This sums up the relationship between majembe and “fogongh'o”. I help the group by farming well,

and they help me when I'm sick or need help." As the Nyamwezi here, these two things help us stay strong (Respondent 19, Buyu, 2025). This story sums up the two ways to survive: being economically self-sufficient and having social insurance that works both ways.

This lived experience exemplifies Cooper's (1980) notion of labor adaptation via cultural and social mechanisms. "In the 1940s, Nyamwezi groups in Zanzibar collectively rented plots of land, which members cultivated with their traditional hoes, merging collective action with cultural labor practices," as indicated by archival documents detailing how associations consolidated resources to obtain farmland (Zanzibar Colonial Archives, 1942).

This picture shows how social capital and material culture worked together to try to improve the economy. Sheriff (1987) said that these ethnic ties were very important for migrant social organization and resource mobilization. "When the rains failed, or illness struck,"fogongh'o" eased the burden so we could keep farming with our majembe," said another Mbweni respondent, showing how strong this dual system made them. A lot of people would have lost everything without this help. (Mbweni, 2025; Respondent 24). The combination of material and social techniques makes a dynamic safety net here. This is similar to Glassman's (2011) study of how migrants in colonial Africa cope with being poor by using a mix of social and cultural resources.

Reflecting on the Symbolism of "majembe ya Kinyamwez"i and "fogongh'o," in Nyamwezi Survival Strategies during Colonial Zanzibar

The "fogongh'o" and "Majembe ya Kinyamwezi" are two great examples of how smart the Nyamwezi people were when they had to live through the hard times in Zanzibar during colonial times. So, life can be pretty hard for migrant workers on farms, right? They often have to deal with really bad conditions and are pushed to the edges of society. But there are two cultural things that really help them: one is something you can touch, and the other is about how people interact. They work together like pillars that are intertwined, which helps them stay strong, keep their identity, and stay together as a community.

These "Majembe ya Kinyamwezi" are more than just tools for farming; they are a strong symbol of cultural identity and what people remember about their heritage. The hoe was very important to the Nyamwezi migrants. It was a tool they could hold and a symbol of their roots, especially after they had to leave their family lands. When colonial powers were trying to ruin local economies and force people to work in new ways, it was a real link to their history and old ways of living. The Nyamwezi people really held on to their identity and kept their economy strong by sticking with their majembe. This was a way to make sure that farming skills were passed down from one generation to the next, even when things changed a lot. The majembe were like living history, keeping the community's traditions alive even when things were hard and new. They were tools that helped people survive and fight against what was happening.

Putting these symbols together gives you a full picture of how people lived, including their social structure and the things they made. The Nyamwezi people who moved around weren't just going with the flow. They really stuck to their social groups and culture. Instead of just giving in to what the colonial bosses wanted and changing how they made a living, this helped them get through hard times. Culture and community really help people deal with feeling out of place or left out. This shows that migrant work isn't always just about being used or feeling alone, which is a common but too simple way of looking at it.

It really seems like "majembe ya Kinyamwezi" and "fogongh'o" fit right in with what Scott (1976) said about moral economy and what Putnam (1993) said about social capital. Glassman's (2011) ideas that material culture can be a place for resistance and identity also apply here. You could also use words like "moral economy" or "social capital" to describe "fogongh'o." In this case, "fogongh'o" is really about social capital. People trusted each other there, felt like they belonged, and that made a big difference in their lives, both socially and financially. When the Nyamwezi people moved, they kept giving their share, which made a support system they could really count on when things got tough. Scott (1976) stated that having this kind of social network was very important for people who moved around a lot and couldn't easily get help from family or official places.

"Fogongh'o" wasn't just about money; it was also about a moral economy, where people did what they thought was right, not just what the market said they should do. People helped out because they all cared about each other's health when someone was sick, when someone died, or when someone got married. They didn't just want something for themselves. Even though the job market was tough and uncertain, the Nyamwezi migrants showed how they held on to their moral and cultural beliefs to help them make ends meet. This really helped them stay together.

"Fogongh'o" was a lot like a way for people to rebuild their community and share risks after slavery ended. This makes a lot of sense if you think about it. Even though their incomes were all over the place and they didn't know if they would have a job tomorrow, it still let the Nyamwezi migrants work together to deal with life's ups and downs and keep their home and community life going strong. Cooper (1980), said that the group's contribution plan helped people when working for pay wasn't enough to solve all of their social problems. When you look at these theories next to each other, it's clear that money isn't the only thing that keeps people alive. It's really connected to their culture and the people they hang out with.

Thus, learning about "fogongh'o" and "Majembe ya Kinyamwezi" helps us better understand what life was like for the Nyamwezi immigrants. It really shows how important their cultural things and community ways were for keeping their identity, figuring things out, and staying strong even though they had a lot of problems in colonial Zanzibar. These new findings give us a much fuller picture of African migrant workers, focusing on how they stayed together, kept their culture alive, and made their own decisions.

SUMMARY

The longer portions of the interviews give a clearer picture of how the Nyamwezi migrant laborers made their survival strategies. It demonstrates that their "majembe ya Kinyamwezi" were more than just practical tools; they had a deeper meaning. Moreover, "fogongh'o" was a very smart concept that served as a social safety net in a variety of ways. Their genuine reliance on one another demonstrated how they approached issues. It ultimately came down to blending their ethnic identities and supporting one another, particularly in the face of colonial difficulties.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the survival strategies of the Nyamwezi individuals who migrated to Zanzibar between the 1890s and 1950s. It really focused on how important "majembe ya Kinyamwezi" and "fogongh'o" were to these migrants, both in their daily lives and as symbols. These were not just tools or money tricks, it turns out. They were very important for keeping their culture alive, staying together as a community, and staying financially stable, especially with all the hard work they had to do on colonial plantations and being pushed to the side. "majembe ya Kinyamwezi" became a very strong symbol. They showed how people fought to keep their culture and not lose it. These tools helped immigrants stay in touch with their families back home and also let them grow food, which was a big help when their jobs weren't stable.

Thus, the idea of "fogongh'o" really showed how people helped each other. It was like their own safety net for socializing, giving people the help they needed, and making the community stronger. These ways of staying alive show how smart the Nyamwezi migrant laborers were at dealing with the harsh rules of colonial times. Instead of just being victims of economic exploitation, these groups used two smart strategies. They combined their material possessions with the way they ran their societies. This helped them stay strong, keep their independence, and stay true to who they were.

This study contributes to ongoing discourse in history and anthropology regarding African migrant labor. It really showed us how important "majembe ya Kinyamwezi" and "fogongh'o" were to these migrants. They were more than just useful tools; they were important symbols in their daily lives. It turns out that these weren't just fancy tools or expensive tricks. They worked hard on those colonial plantations and were pushed to the side. They were very important for keeping their culture, community, and financial stability. Their story is a great example of how a group of people can stay together and keep their culture alive, even when things are tough. It teaches us a lot about ourselves and what we can do when we work together, especially when things are tough.

REFERENCES

1. Berry, S. (1993). *No condition is permanent: The social dynamics of agrarian change in sub-Saharan Africa*. University of Wisconsin Press.
2. Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10(2), 141–163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004912418101000205>
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
4. Cooper, F. (1980). *From slavery to wage labor in Africa: Central Africa in the nineteenth century*. University of Wisconsin Press.
5. Feierman, S. (1990). *Peasant intellectuals: Anthropology and history in Tanzania*. University of Wisconsin Press.
6. Glassman, J. (2011). War of words: Language and conflict in the colonial African context. *Journal of African History*, 52(2), 187–212. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853711000020>
7. Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
8. Iliffe, J. (1979). *A modern history of Tanganyika*. Cambridge University Press.
9. Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: The hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(4), 327–344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701401305>
10. Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.
11. Scott, J. C. (1976). *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.
12. Sheriff, A. (1987). *Slaves, spices and ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of coastal East Africa, 1770–1873*. James Currey.
13. Woolcock, M. (1998). Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework. *Theory and Society*, 27(2), 151–208. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006884930135>
14. Zanzibar Agricultural Department. (1935). *Report on agricultural labor and migrant farming practices*. Zanzibar Archives.
15. Zanzibar Colonial Archives. (1942). *Records on ethnic associations and land use in Zanzibar*. Zanzibar Archives.