

WHY ZANZIBAR REEKS

Elizabeth Godfrey (South Luangwa, Zambia)

You can look away, but you can't ignore the smell. Or can you? Elizabeth Godfrey explores the complexities of waste in Zanzibar, and the (non) relationships such waste reveals.

Most unavoidably: the trash. There are no proper facilities for waste disposal on Unguja, the main island of Zanzibar, nor are there waste regulations or the resources for a waste management programme. One just must contend with the residue of fishing nets, Styrofoam floats, plastic buoy bottles. One just must ignore bony, deformed looking livestock as they sift through and defecate on empty rice sacks and broken glass. It stinks. This might seem a bizarre description of an island that is famed for its paradise beauty, but most foreigners to Unguja do not even notice. Foreigners, both holiday visitors and residents, do not care to look closely at the island, or look at all. Instead, they concentrate solely on a specific aesthetic: the ocean filled frame they desire. What lies in their peripheral vision is nothing more than the other stuff – the crap, the waste – behind the preferred domain.

It stinks but most foreigners to Unguja do not even notice.

This is precisely what is toxic about Unguja: there is little foreign desire to see the human landscape, the social and material space, the fixed life. Foreigners to the island patronize ex-pat operated hotels and



Unguja Morning Scene

Courtesy: Elizabeth Godfrey

lodges, none of which involve structured inclusion of Zanzibar citizens other than through employment. On the island of Unguja, there are no hotels with community benefit (no outreach programmes or capacity building initiatives, for instance), no eco-lodges, and very few advertised outings to the interior. Foreigners who visit and reside on the island isolate themselves on the outskirts, barricade their consumption, and have their trash dumped on the unseen terrestrial backdrop.

There is thus a miasma between nationalities on Unguja, a miasma opaque with the dregs of consumerism. The Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar



Unguja Sunset Scene

Photo: Courtesy Elizabeth Godfrey

makes it exceedingly difficult for foreigners to establish legal tourist operations on the islands, and so foreign businesses rarely operate legally. Foreigners working in Zanzibar pay at least thirty percent of their gross salary to the government in tax; businesses are subject to unannounced immigration visits and fines; tax must be paid on each individual visitor to a hotel, even complimentary guests. And so some owners establish their businesses as “voluntary initiatives”, work using a volunteer permit, and earn money off the books; there are often protocols for who speaks and who conceals if or when an immigration official arrives; and cash-paying visitors stay off the record. The miasma thickens as the transient subjects continue to turn a blind eye to (those who inhabit) the fixed space, and government officials emphasize that it is a highly taxable privilege – not a necessity – for Euro-Americans to be on Zanzibar.

On Unguja, this peripheral blindness, peripheral avoidance, is striking. The vast majority, if not all, of the tourism endeavors neglect the potential for



Unguja Un-Scene
Photo: Courtesy Nell Hamilton

cultural exchange on the island. The way Zanzibaris – those people – live is not understood as financially beneficial to business, so relationships are not explored. Unlike some of the game park destinations in East Africa, Zanzibar tourism often does not involve local knowledge and skill. Many dive instructors and snorkel guides are foreigners with international degrees in marine biology, which perhaps renders these oceanic interactions more enchanting. Yet, that there may exist material of equivalent interest on the island's terrestrial systems – in the natural and human history – is rarely considered, and thus the opportunity for local interpretation is ignored. Local natural resource handling and use on Unguja is fascinating: invertebrate collection in the intertidal zones, the manipulation of coconut husks for coir rope, building with fossilized coral, dhow construction techniques and launching ceremonies, spice farming and spice trade. The further inward one wanders, the more spectacular and complicated

the eco/systems. The beaches of Unguja are but the crust around several endemic species of plants and animals; unique medicinal and spiritual understandings; an intricate language distinct from the Kiswahili on mainland East Africa; a contradicted, proud sense of political autonomy.

Yet much of this is missed by foreigners who set foot on Unguja, especially those who call Zanzibar a home. Those people gripe endlessly about the corruption of their Zanzibari staff, the inconvenience of local employment conditions, the hassle created by government officials. Those people live in East Africa exclusively for their business ventures. Those people care for the Indian Ocean because tourists love white sands. Those people disregard potential for intercultural and interpersonal exchange because, as long as tourists come for beaches, they have no need to feign interest. People of waste: those people.

The pollution on Zanzibar is glaring, if one dares to glance around.

British colonials did notice the rubbish in the nineteenth century, and they attempted to organize waste management on Unguja by introducing the Indian House Crow. This effort to clean up the island was, and continues to be, an environmental and ecological disaster: Indian Crows eat everything, from trash to endemic bird and mammal species. They have irreparably altered biodiversity around Unguja and throughout Zanzibar. Since the mid-twentieth century, there have been several unsuccessful eradication attempts, and today the environmental damage continues, and the trash remains.

Of course trash was not the only sight and scent registered by the colonizing north: the perfume of spices, most pungently cloves, intoxicated the Western World from the nineteenth century onwards. One of Zanzibar's main exports, indeed the export for which it was most famed, was used to flavour the bland and infuse European households with stimulating scents from the south. Zanzibar is what it is today because of a Western market for the ingredients with which one could cover up undesirable smells. From the metropole, Europeans could cook and decorate with the fruits of Zanzibar without having to witness the conditions of production. Today, from the periphery of the periphery, they actively refuse to see. Euro-Americans travel to Zanzibar for sights, not smells, and the human conditions are un-noticed; on Unguja, foreigners limit their sense-abilities to avoid the displays and odors – the facts – of local humanity.

This main island of Zanzibar festers with estrangement, which renders meaningful cohabitation between nationalities impossible. If there is no palpable foreign appreciation for the many landscapes on Zanzibar, if the heart of the island is regarded as merely a waste-land, then this miasma will only intensify. Instead of cultivating authentic, consequential relationships around Unguja, hotel entrepreneurs and tourists place themselves at safe distances, and focus on the consumerism inside their establishments and their own capitalist expenditures. They isolate themselves indiscreetly: on the periphery, faced away from the interior core. Thus the waste abounds, the stench lingers, and the potential for larger, panoramic outlooks is unseen and ignored in favor of Westward evening views.