

July 2005 – ZIFF and Sorrow

It's July 12, 2005 and I'm writing again so soon because much has happened in just a short time and I want to document as much of it as I can. First of all, we had 10 days of celebration here with ZIFF – the Zanzibar Int'l Film Festival. It was very exciting and I was busy every day seeing movies (a treat here because there is no cinema on the island) and meeting very interesting people. I was also still filming a movie which we've been doing for the last month. It's a movie about six ex-patriate women who have chosen to migrate to Zanzibar – we spent four days together doing art workshops, writing workshops and group discussions as to what prompted us to up and move to a foreign land. It was a fascinating experience and I have made some new close friends. After our four day workshop that was filmed we each wrote a "monologue" about our lives and then six other women were to "interpret" the monologues during the festival this year. We, the "travelers", did not meet the interpreters so they performed our story from their own vantage point. My story was the first to be interpreted and it was done by a Kenyan African woman, Mshai Mwangola, who is an incredibly powerful performer. She is a professor at Northwestern University in Chicago and I was in tears during the performance. She used many of my own words and it was quite an experience just hearing them coming from another's mouth with such intensity. My friend, Lisette, who was also a traveler held my hand during the performance because she knew that it was going to be emotional for me. The film maker is a strong woman, Florence Ayisi, from Cameroon. She is a professor in Wales, England and this year won an award at Cannes Film Festival for a film that she did on women and the judicial system in Cameroon. She is hoping to present this film that we just finished here at ZIFF next year – now that will certainly be an experience to see myself on a wide screen!!! One thing that I did learn is that I'm not cut out for the film industry – I'm very happy doing just what I'm doing in my daily life.



Here are all the "travelers" – Fatma from Tanzania, Aida from US, Lisette from Holland, Me, Helen from UK and Guiliana from Peru. Here I am with Mshai who interpreted my story – what a beautiful woman she is!!! And here is the crew filming Mshai again on the beach – the first night of the festival was loud because we were near a mosque, it was right after evening prayers, and the imam was talking over the loudspeaker so they refilmed some of the stories in a quiet place.

ZIFF itself was a lot of fun – the first day there was a parade through Stonetown and then parties and showings that were great. They showed films outside in the Old Fort every night and during the day films ran continuously in a large room at the Africa House hotel. The films were about the Dhow countries – of Africa, the Middle East and India. Many of them were of war, orphans and displacement. The film that won first prize was about an older man and his grandson walking across part of Afghanistan on his way to tell his son that their village and entire family had been wiped out in a bombing. It was a journey of self discovery meeting other people and watching others die along the way. It was a beautifully directed and photographed film. I met a Sudanese woman who presented her first film, All About Darfur. There were also films about AIDS orphans and about the aftermath of Rwanda, Uganda and Congo. I also met the guest of honor of the festival who was Mweze Ngangura, a Congolese film director. He was a very interesting man – I met photographers, writers and my friend Farouque put on a wonderful fashion show that Guiliana's daughter was a model in. Lots of fun.

I also met such interesting people – Carol Mandi who is the editor of True Love Magazine in Nairobi (it's like Cosmopolitan) and Leila Ingrams stayed with me. Both of them are extraordinary women – Leila's father was a British Colonial officer who was stationed here in Zanzibar and then in Yemen as private secretary to the sultans in both places. Leila spent much of her childhood in Yemen and considers herself a Bedouin at heart. We connected on a very deep level and she helped me tremendously through much of the pain that I was in during the week that she was here.



Here I am with Carol from Nairobi, Mweze from Congo, Florence, our film maker from Cameroon and Taghreed from Sudan presenting her film for the first time.



Here is the head of the parade on stilts and Emerson directing him. Emerson is one of the owners of Emerson Green Hotel and was the driving force behind the inception of ZIFF. And as we walked through the narrow streets of Stonetown people would hang out their windows and wave to everyone going by. Here is my friend Guiliana, her husband Kwanko and their son Matteo. Guiliana is Peruvian and was one of the travelers.

Both Aida, who envisioned the women's workshop and organized all of it and Guiliana are magnificent artists – here is some of their work



This is Aida's rendering of our workshop when we spent the day at Guiliana's house and the other two are Guiliana's batiks – they are both wonderful artists.



I experienced much joy on July 10 which was my 24th AA anniversary. There are no AA meetings here in Zanzibar and I have missed them terribly. I am involved with an online group – AA in Africa and Greg H found me through that group. Greg lived here 8 years ago and hit his bottom here – he's has been healing and progressing in his sobriety and decided to come back to Zanzibar to make amends and heal some more. We have been emailing for a month and it's been incredible. Although I am in constant email contact with other recovering alcoholics there is nothing like the physical presence of another sober person. Greg attended the international conference in Canada last week and spoke up at a meeting of AA in Africa and told them that he was coming to Zanzibar and would be reaching out the hand of AA to me for my anniversary. Well, a woman came up to him afterwards and told him that she had just celebrated 25 years and gave him her 24 year coin to give to me. It's a very special coin with pictures of Bill and Bob on the front – I've never seen anything so beautiful before. He also had members of his home group sign a card for me which was so special. Greg and I went to the market on my anniversary and shopped for food then came home and we baked my birthday cake. He put some candles on it and sang Happy Birthday to me and then we started a proper meeting. I read the preamble and he read How It Works while I sobbed and sobbed. I have been listening to AA speakers on tapes and I would close my eyes when they read the preamble and pretend that I'm in a meeting but there is NOTHING like having another person there. I told my story and Greg shared and we are planning on having some more meetings before he leaves on July 24. My hope is that we start a real meeting here in Stonetown – Greg brought a bunch of Big Books and other books in Swahili and I have some that I got from a friend in Dar. Greg is going to be contacting some people that might be able to help to find us another alcoholic who has stopped drinking or wants to stop. Wow – talk about working the 12th step!!!!



And then it was also a week of deep deep sorrow. Here is Laura and her two boys – Nassir, 9, closest to her and Sabri, 7, the youngest. I met Laura and the boys when I first arrived in Dar es Salaam and was staying at the U of Dar. Laura is a professor in Oregon and first came to Zanzibar in 1988 as a researcher studying cinema in Zanzibar. She married a Zanzibari and had the two boys and has returned to Zanzibar often. She is divorced and her ex-husband still lives in Oregon. Laura came in September on a Fulbright to study cinema in Tanzania and is staying in a house on the U of Dar campus. I would stay with them when I went to Dar and they would visit me whenever they came here. She reminds me of myself as a single mother with my two boys. Nassir was outspoken and raucous and Sabri was quiet and sweet and loved for me to read him books. Nassir always was so patient with my Swahili and spent a lot of time correcting me – he helped me so much. Laura had gone to Mombasa Kenya to do an interview for her research and had sent the boys to Pemba (the other small island of Zanzibar) to spend time with their grandparents. She picked them up almost two weeks ago on Wed and took them home to Dar – she also had a friend of hers from Zanzibar come with them (thank goodness). Nassir got very sick and died the next day of malaria and dysentery – it has been a terrible shock and heartbreaking. Children and elderly people can get sick so quickly here in Africa and it can be difficult to realize the implications of what is happening. He must have been sick in Pemba but his grandparents may not have known what to do. I went to the funeral which was a Muslim funeral – the women were in a separate house from the men and I entered a long narrow room with almost 100 women sitting on mats reciting passages from the Koran. There were many more women sitting outside also reciting. Laura was sitting against the wall in the middle of the room and there were three other white women there. The Zanzibari women told me to go sit by her and her friend Annie took my mtandio (my shawl) and covered my hair with it – it's custom for a woman to cover her hair here. I didn't know if I should hug Laura or what so we held hands and tears ran down our faces. The men came in after an hour or so from the other house with a coffin that was covered in prayer rugs and open at one end. Nassir's body had been kept in the kitchen and they brought him out shrouded in what looked like burlap and put him in the coffin. There were more prayers said and then the men took the coffin and walked it down the street to the mosque. Laura has a shamba (small farm) up the coast and they buried him there – usually only the men go to the gravesite but Laura had told her ex-husband and the other men that it was her American custom to be at the gravesite and that she wanted to go. Two of the other white women drove her out and the men were very gracious. Laura will be going to Pemba to visit the family there to let them and the villagers know that she doesn't blame them – there is a concern that the villagers will think that she may put a spell on them. Witchcraft is practiced here by many many people including ex-patriates. I went to visit her and Sabri yesterday at a friend's house where they're staying and the loss is palpable. I don't see how she can bear the pain of losing a child. She is going to go back to the States early to be with her family there and my heart will go with her. I am so fortunate to have my boys who are healthy and I wish that they were nearby so that I could hold them but that will have to wait.

I am returning to the States on September 2 until October 10 to visit CT, CA and Boston. I can't wait to see everyone and I will definitely be going to an AA meeting every single day to fill up. My NGO ZAPHA+ is moving into their new larger building this week – it was funded by the Clinton Foundation. The next two weeks are going to be action packed. Laura Bush is coming to Zanzibar this Thursday although she won't be meeting with ZAPHA+ (thank goodness) and next Tuesday the Zanzibar government is launching the ARV program publicly and then next Thursday Bill Clinton is coming to visit and hopefully will meet with some of our members. So there is lots for me to do to get prepared – writing speeches etc etc. It will be very exciting and I will be so happy when it's all over – I think I'll take a few days and go up the coast without my computer and just lay on the beach with a book or two.

I hope that everyone is well and know that I'm thinking of you.

Kathryn