

Work of Waiting

The headline in the local paper said it all - Tanzania's Development Problem Identified: Time Management. The article went on at length; 'while the average Tanzanian works an 18 hour day, he or she spends too much time in greetings' …but perhaps I should explain…

First, a few observations…William and Yosuf are our Embassy-provided guards. Each of them works a twelve hour day - they get two days off after sixty hour's work and they rotate the night shift every week. The night shift requires them to stay up all night, but that isn't the bad part. The bad part is those damn clouds of mosquitoes - they never go away and never leave these guys in peace.

William got 'guard of the month' yesterday – good job, William! That's him in the photo above. He's good...the guy has the gate open so fast I don't even have to slow down when I come barreling through in the car, I never even have to beep. It's not like I keep regular hours either, where he could know that 'oh, it's six-thirty, so Mike should be coming home.' I just sort of come and go, and (as far as I know) he has never mistakenly opened the gate for another car – really quiet a feat. In between times he sits as still as a lizard in his little plastic chair, eyes closed to slits. I think of this as his Zen pose.

Down the dusty road from here, just beyond the kids' school, is Four Corners – a place where every corner is crammed wall-to-wall with little tin shacks called 'dukas', the local word for store. The dukas sell everything imaginable, from hardware (nylon rope, electrical sockets, nails sold in packets or one by one) to tins of food, newspapers, phone cards, and kerosene. There are probably fifty little shops, most competing among themselves (the three beer stands share a common counter top, the two newspaper kiosks protect their papers with a common plastic tarp). There are usually about one hundred vendors in that tiny area at any given moment, not including the fleet of hopeful taxis always stationed there. And everybody is waiting…

So what is everybody waiting for? The kids who carry thirty pairs of used pants on hangers everywhere they go, the guys who wait for someone to buy sunglasses displayed in Styrofoam? What's everybody waiting for? Well, I think I know...

With thirty five million people, most making about a buck a day, it can take a lot of waiting before a buck will pass your way. There just isn't a whole lot of money to chase around – to a certain extent there isn't much to do other than to simply sit and hope and wait.

And that brings us back to the article I read the other day. The article says that the survey results conclusively showed that the average Tanzanian sleeps from ten p.m. to four a.m., or an average of six hours every day. The article also says, 'that means Tanzanians work eighteen hours every day'. Now at first blush, you might be tempted to say, 'whoa, you can't work every other hour of the day!…but if you said that, you wouldn't be counting the waiting. Because if you say 'working' includes - not just the lucky few with real paid work - but also all those willing to work but having to wait until a buck finally comes their way, then pretty much everyone is working every waking hour of the day.

And that's where Time Management finally comes into play. It seems this survey also found that Tanzanians spend an average of three minutes greeting each and everyone they meet ("how's the work, how's the family, how are the kids at home?" - that's the typical line - to which you answer 'peaceful' every time). But here's the rub: the study finds that because everyone is working all the time, all that greeting is really stealing precious taking time...from work! Ah, well okay, the logic is a little flawed, but after thinking about it for a while, I agree that waiting ought to be considered work. And what dreadful thankless job it looks to be.