

Corruption

04/25/06 Seeds of Corruption

Many bus companies in Tanzania are accused of importing buses declare "totaled" in accidents elsewhere. Cobbled together just enough to list down roads like boats heeling in high winds, wheels splayed, careening sideways into on-coming traffic, these "phoenix buses" race hell-bent towards the ends of their second lives.

In fact, the highways are littered with their carcasses, caved-in from tumbles or burned-out shells. Some roll down deep escarpments, others connect in head-on contests of stubborn wills. And the real tragedy isn't the ugly remnant of these accidents — the splattered glass smeared with rust-colored blood. The real heartbreak comes from the realization that, here in a country with less than one private vehicle for every one hundred people, phoenix buses are the only ride in town.

I got stopped by a cop the other day. He flagged me over by waving an ancient speed gun. When he got up to my car, he pointed to the reading, a "95" someone had permanently stenciled on the screen.

"Speeding," he reminded me, tapping on the painted number. "Know what we do now?"

"I pay, right?" I'm not bragging, but I know how to play this game. I greased him with a ten and we quickly parted ways.

Which got me talking to a friend about the rampant corruption here the other day. He actually specializes in the subject, so he explains it this way: "The social contract has never been established." That, being brainiac for something I don't understand, he tries again: "Where you come from, you pay the government your taxes and you get services in return. Here, we evade our taxes and we expect nothing in return."

"But what about the one billion dollars a year coming in from all the international donors? I can't help but ask. "Don't you think you're due a bit of that?"

He smiles and shrugs. "Colonial rule was within my lifetime. Back then bilking the colonials was considered clever sport...not that much has changed. We like the idea that we get the money, but what do the Big Men do with it? We'll never know; so it is best not to care."

Okay, let's even say I buy all that, that still leaves you with the phoenix buses (and yes, I admit, my speeding ticket too). When it is so cheap and easy to violate the law -half the wait and half the cost — it becomes a pretty attractive thing to do. And you know, no one's hurt — because it is just "clever sport". Except that, as we know, shit happens, like careening buses turning into burnt-out shells, and Tanzanians — with no alternative to these phoenix buses — turn into fresh road kill. Which reminds me of this other thing I heard,

The most frequent accomplice to the crime of corruption is our own indifference. Betty Meyerson