WOMEN'S PANORAMA
JOURNEYS AND SPACES MIGRATION STORIES
OF WOMEN IN ZANZIBAR

By Alice Aida Ayers

On Journeys

What motivates a woman in the 21st century to pack up the life she has known her entire existence on earth and move to an unknown environment, a new culture, to create a space that is conducive to her growth and well being? We may hear answers to this question such as, 'she has always been a runaway, trying to find herself in others', 'She is never satisfied, always believing that the grass is greener on the other side', 'She is following some man she claims to be in love with', 'She has the opportunity for career advancement, she'll be able to write her own ticket', 'She wants to experience it personally, not just read about it or watch it on television.'

To each of these suggestions there are reasonable answers and justifications for why she could have stayed put and accomplished her goals right where she was. The runaway must look internally to find the self that will fulfil, Satisfaction comes through acceptance, one must love ones self and not be led by the whims of others. You make your own opportunities; trying to experience everything only keeps you hungry for more.

The impetus for journeys and migrations are as varied as women themselves. For the women who choose to journey, is there something in their genetic makeup, their upbringing, their psyche or their spirit that instills the desire to relocate, migrate, travel, journey leave. Are the motivations different from those of men?

The common thread for these women is the fact of being 'woman.'

On Space

What is the significance of a woman having her own space? What is the true value of women coming together in a space and creating a community? There is a transformation that occurs in the psyche of women when they bond together. They relax, let down their guard and feel compelled to share their stories; they find a way to deal with demons that haunt them and overcome obstacles that prevent them from coming into their own spirit. They embrace their uniqueness, characteristics which may not be acceptable to their society. The 'sisterhood' that develops serves to validate the 'her-stories' of these women and provides the light that guides each woman to her destiny.

Finding ones own space, for some women is a life-long mission. It is more than being comfortable in a place, with the surroundings or the people. It is more a matter of being
peaceful in your own skin, not having to put on pretences, whether it be through the use of cosmetics, clothes or attitudes. Claiming a space is an internal process, a specific course of spiritual development. It encompasses the freedom to 'BE', without reservations or apologies.

Through understanding ourselves we are naturally prepared to understand and accept other women. One of our greatest challenges as women is the acceptance of others without prejudice. This level of acceptance comes through self evaluation, it is a process of giving and letting go. Being in a space where we share our idiosyncrasies, expose our insecurities, and glory in our triumphs is what helps sisterhood to develop and grow.

**Project Description**

During the period between June 14 and 17, 2005, seven women from different cultures, different countries and different generations came together for four days to share the stories of their migrations to Zanzibar.

The goal of the four day workshop was for the women to develop monologues that included the reasons for leaving their birthplace, their homes, and their comfort zones. They were to discuss the journeys and their many forms, inclusive of personal, physical and spiritual. It was to be a gathering of women in a shared space engaged in dialogue of why and how women migrate, their expectations and dreams versus the reality of living here in Zanzibar.

Iyana Van Zant states that in life everything that we truly focus on becomes reality. We live it first internally before it happens in the real world. Our thoughts become our reality and even though we cannot see our thoughts, we see the results. That being said, the women involved in the four day workshop made discoveries of influences, events, messages and people that have contributed to forming their thoughts, thoughts which partially or completely define who she is.

The sessions chosen for this workshop contained specific exercises designed to help each person tap in to her source, to commune with her spirit on a higher level and enable her to discuss, develop and write her story. There were many times when the revelations were painful, but that is part of the process of growth, each woman was asked to go with it, feel it, breathe and share it with love.

The women were required to participate in every exercise whole heartedly. Each evening after the sessions were complete, they were required to write a few pages in journals, while the experience of the session was fresh in her mind. They practiced what was learnt that day in order to cement the procedures and delve deeper into their own consciousness.

The women participating were chosen based on their desire to participate in honest and uncensored dialogue. It was essential that each person was able to trust all of those involved. Exercises were performed for the purpose of developing trust between the women. The experience was a self realization process for many of the women involved, as many times we did not fully understand the reasons for our personal migrations.

Participants in the pre festival workshops whose stories were documented came from
Tanzania, America, Peru, Sweden, Germany, UK. Each interpreter has carte blanche with how she chooses to present her monologue.

Beginning July 3, the first of the monologues produced during the workshop were interpreted. I use the term 'interpret', because the stories of these women were presented by other women, who had had no contact with the previous group and were required to develop a performance or present the monologue given them. The interpreters were all performers of various forms of art. Written and spoken word, bilingual presentation, performance, film and dance. The reason for the anonymity of the travellers was twofold; first, in order to explore more fully the connection that exists between how women feel and how women are perceived, the presenter was to interpret the monologue based on her own understanding of the experience of the traveller she represented.

There was a specific set of questions that I had hoped to answer by utilizing the methods chosen. Do all or most women experience 'growing up' in the same manner, regardless of geographical location, childhood trauma, or cultural practices? I am not speaking of norms and mores. I am more interested in personal relationships with the universe, i.e. environment, animals, cultures, life, death and birth. Is emotional expression or interpretation inherent to being a woman? In other words, upon hearing my story, do you sympathise (feel what I feel) with the situation, or empathise (understand and accept what I feel)? Does the idea of sisterhood transcend nationality, religion, socialisation?

Secondly, the project is an effort to build bridges and open communication between women who choose to live in other countries and indigenous women. The monologues presented would be a composite of 'woman', and not to be used for the purpose of singling out any specific person.

We present below two of the monologues as a sample of the exercise.

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**First Memories**

I never had a place to call my own, a safe haven, where I knew no harm would befall me. The same dangers that I was warned existed 'in the streets', were present in my parents' house. So I guess my whole life has been spent in search of a safe home. A place where old men did not have the right to touch my body or slobber on me with cigar and whiskey kisses, where the rules specified that my brother could not pull me into the dark closet and have his way.

**First Journeys**

Between the ages 14 and 16, I had made my home in a number of locations. A public park for 2 months, the family of a high school friend, one of my high school teachers, a family of women whom I did not know, and the house of my eldest sister who was a heroin addict. The strangest thing about this, is that I felt safer in all of these places than I did in my parents' home.

**Desperate Alternatives**

The military provided me with shelter, food, discipline and education. It also provid-
ed oppression, self hate, and racial discrimination. Ten years, two marriages, one child, four states, 20 jobs and too many boyfriends later I decided to try higher education.

More Bad Choices
I think I was drawn to my first husband because I thought I could change him, save him from himself. However, two years of almost daily beatings were all I could handle. His choice of alcohol and cocaine became a priority. My own cowardice prevented a successful suicide attempt. An escape in the middle of the night with my infant child led me back to my parents' home, to the place from which I thought I had escaped.

Educating the Spirit
I learned about Sojourner Truth, who was to become my 'Shero', how against all odds she escaped slavery and provided passage for hundreds of others to freedom. In my heart I adopted her as my mother figure and chose to follow her example. I became the rescuer of lost souls, the shoulder to cry on, a friend to the very end.

My Salvation
I have been an artist all my life. That has been the one constant in my life, my solace, my pleasure. For many years I kept it secret, protected it, out of fear of it being despoiled, I provided a safe place for it to flourish. I began sharing my talent in 1987, but only in small bits and in special places. My art and my child were the waves of hope that guided me and pulled forward.

The Exodus
The first time I set foot on the continent of my ancestors, I was so overwhelmed that I almost fainted. I dropped to my knees allowed my soul to cry out all the pain that I had held onto for 30 years. I knew the smells, the weight of the air and the familiar spirits that I saw through the eyes of people I met. It was at that point that I knew I had been born in the wrong place. I am not trying to reclaim my birthright, I am still searching for a safe haven. I carry a photo of my great grandmother; it was taken in 1856 while she was a slave. I have her eyes and her brow, heavy with the burden of remembrance. If she had been born in Africa, she might have been a Queen. I don't have her colour, I have been whitewashed throughout the generations.

The Here and Now
After living on the outer reaches of my own society for so long, I decided to make a permanent move to the continent. I needed to be around people who I thought looked like me and shared parts of my soul. Their rejection of me has not come as hard as one might think. For I have had many years to build the barricade around my heart. It is extraordinary to think that all my life, I have fought to overcome the stereotypes placed upon me as a Black woman. Here and now, even more outlandish is the idea that I am fighting the stereotypes being placed upon me as a white woman. My search continues...
When I was 6 -12 years I used to listen to music on the radio. Near the place where we lived there was a local bar where they played local music, resembling Super Mazembe, Mangelepa, Mbaraka Mwinшеhe and other orchestra jazz bands in Tanzania. Some of the songs reminded me of joyful things, when people had drinks and started to sing and worked zig zag: 'Kasongo yeye ohoho mobali nangai, Kasongo nganaleli mobali nanga yee.'

My mummy used to sing when she was busy. I remember this song:

'Ni kinda langu ni lenye rangi ya chungwa
Nifanye nini nipate ili nipate tulia. Nachoka kabisa.
Chorus 'ee nachoka nachoka kwa yote uliyonifanyia
poa dede kipenzi cha roho yangu ahadi yetu haitaweza vanjika......'

The woman next door was divorced and left behind with three children without any possibility to call upon assistance. She asked her neighbour on the other side for space where she could stay with her children. She had a very tough and difficult life. With very little money she had to feed her children. Hence she decided to open a small business - 'genge'. This way she managed to send her children to school. She was working very hard and her knowing boss asked her if she would want to go for training and change the department. She did and performed well. She found a small plot and built a small house and continued to work and study. The way I saw this woman, who did and could do wonders, meant to me that women are powerful, able to handle big responsibilities.

I had a boyfriend with whom I planned to get married. He intended to have himself introduced to my parents, but one month before he went to see them, I learned he had another woman who was pregnant. This I had never expected to happen. Because of the bad news, I decided not to pursue my relationship with him and asked him not to follow me.

I found out the other woman was trying to make sure they would be married as soon as possible. At that time he had not yet made the decision to marry her, however, so he told her she was the woman of his choice. She lost the baby and I was labelled a witch by her and her friends. In this culture that almost equals to a death sentence.

I met my husband at the institute where we studied. He was just a friend like the others. For him it was quite different: he had always been close with me.

One day he said to me: 'you know I love you. I would like you to be my wife.' I couldn't believe what I had heard and decided just to wait and see. After I finished my studies, we communicated through telephone every single day. Finally I figured that he was being serious and sincere about his feelings. We had to go through many discussions: having different religious backgrounds, we acknowledged this might lead to future problems if we married and especially if God gave us children. We agreed we would both remain in the sphere of our own religion, no converting, while the kids would follow their father's.

My husband then sent my parents the message to marry me. For my father it was
very difficult to accept it, exactly because he did not like me to be married to someone not part of my religion. I struggled to convince him with the support of my brother and sisters, and in the end he accepted. So my husband and I got married and I followed him to Zanzibar. I now have one child, six years old now, and I thank Allah for I so enjoy my marriage.

I feel Zanzibar is a good place; I like the environment; I like the culture, but still I feel it is not my final destination. I would like to move to other places, but until now it remains uncertain.