



A NIGHT ON THE STREETS WITH MOSHI'S YOUTH:

A narrative by Mkombozi volunteer, Jen Harding

On Monday night, I spent the night in Moshi town with several Mkombozi outreach workers: Theo, Daddy, and Respick. Theo had invited all Mkombozi staff to join him in sleeping on the street in order to see how our street-based youths live on a day-to-day basis. We also did an informal count of the number of children and youth currently sleeping on the streets.

We met up with Theo at 10pm at a typical local cinema in Mbuyuni. The owner, nicknamed Babaa by the kids, is a good friend to the children and youth we work with. He lets Theo use the storefront when it is empty in the mornings for brief lessons and check-in conversations with the boys. And he allows the kids to watch TV and hang out there without harassing them. After greeting Babaa, we walked around the corner and visited the place we would be sleeping that night. Just across the street from the Mbuyuni market, there is a storefront owned by a woman named Mama Hadija although the kids on the street call her Mama Azizi. She is a friend to our kids – she allows large groups of boys to sleep on her front stoop every night.

Theo had heard recently about a new guesthouse in town where women have been prostituting themselves. He had heard that some of the girls there are very young – and so we decided to go there, have a soda, and observe the environment. When we arrived, we saw that it definitely seemed like the type of place where a man could get a room and a girl. It was 11pm on a Monday night and there were a number of drunk men and women there. The good news: we sat there for an hour and didn't see a single young girl.

We then walked through a back part of town and down to the bus stand. We soon arrived at the bus stand and did a quick count – 12 kids sleeping on the concrete outside of stores on the north side... and another 10 youths hanging out, still awake, about 20 feet away. We were welcomed to their bench with jovial calls of "Teacha!" – they were all happy to see Theo and to meet us, his guests. About five guys hanging out were older street youth. We talked to them for a while as they grumbled about the new rules prohibiting selling things or carrying bags in the bus stand, even if you have a uniform and ID. They said the rules are making it hard for them to earn money, and that if they are caught they have to pay a fine of 20,000 Tsh or go to the station.

It was great to see that the older youth trust Theo and are eager to help the younger kids get off the streets. We had only been there a couple of minutes when they pointed out two young boys as "wageni" and encouraged the boys to greet us. Theo, Daddy, and Rey all made a point to casually talk to the new kids for a few minutes each. Before we left, the youth told us about another 6 boys who were asleep in a grassy area about 150 feet north of the stand. Apparently they always sleep there together to protect themselves from other youth.



So far, our informal count of full-time street-kids (before we even left the bus stand) was up to 28. Around 1am, we headed back to the stoop where we had begun the night's journey. As we walked back, we checked under buses, inside boxes, and behind walls – we found a group of four boys sleeping, huddled together, behind a fallen-down sign on the sidewalk on the double road. We found one other boy sleeping alone behind a low stone wall. Our count was up to 33.

When we got back to Mama Azizi's, there were about six boys still awake, playing cards on the stoop under a fluorescent light. We talked and played cards with them for more than two hours. There were also a large number of boys sleeping about 10 feet away from us. When I walked over to count them I saw young boys – as young as nine, by my guess – huddled together on the pavement. Mostly just wearing shorts and t-shirts. Almost all barefoot – if anything, wearing malapas. Maybe half of the boys slept on top of cardboard pieces to keep out the chill of the concrete... I counted about 15 boys lying on Mama Azizi's stoop – it was hard to tell since they were so packed together – but, counting the six boys we were playing cards with, our count of full-time street kids on this Monday night was 54.

I stayed awake to play cards with the boys until about 4am. At one point, some guards across the street started fighting and beating another man. The kids playing cards with me ran over to investigate, but they didn't want to get involved. They came back and quickly started the game up again. We were playing cards when suddenly one of the boys put his hand on my knee and whispered, "NYOKA!" I looked behind me and sure enough – eight inches from my other knee – was a skinny, dark brown snake slithering along the wall. I jumped up and ran. One of the kids yelled for the guards, who stopped fighting and ran over to kill the snake with their big sticks.

I decided to try to sleep at around 4 am. I lay down on the concrete near a huddled group of boys. I was lying closest to one boy who looked about 10 years old. He was in the fetal position, his t-shirt pulled up over his chin, his bare head rested directly on the concrete. His hands, pressed together prayer-style, were shoved between his thighs to keep them warm. He looked cold, uncomfortable, exposed. But he was sleeping peacefully, and soon I was too. I was, however, soon awakened by a boy nudging his friends to tell them that that it was 5am; time for the younger kids to start collecting scrap metal.

After shaking the sleep off, we began our last mission of the night: a 10 year old boy who had been sleeping with us was sick with malaria. Theo had taken him to the hospital earlier on Monday – but as evening arrived, the boy had begun to be afraid of sleeping alone in the hospital. So he snuck out and ran back to his friends on the streets. Theo formulated a new plan: he found an older street youth who was willing to stay with the kid in the ward. So we woke up the two boys and escorted them to the hospital around 5:30am. As it opened, we were settling the boy back into the same ward he was in yesterday.

Around 7:30am we decided to leave the boys in the competent hands of the nurses. We walked to the bus stand and found a dala back to Majengo. I was happy to be home... but I was depressed too. For the first time I realized how fortunate I was and how difficult each night is for those 54 street kids who simply don't have a home to return to.

