

Islamic Ethics in Environmental Conservation:

A Visit to Misali Island, Zanzibar

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Photos by C. Wolinsky, Joe Graham,
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An island paradise where ocean breezes temper tropical heat, Misali Island is an Indian Ocean gem steeped in Islamic history and natural beauty. Located 10 km off the coast of Zanzibar's northernmost island, Pemba, in the channel between Zanzibar and mainland Tanzania, Misali is a small 1km² island. Though uninhabited due to lack of fresh water, it has historically served as an important fishing and spiritual site for Pemban villagers who set up temporary camps on the island when fishing its waters. More recently, Misali's abundant reef life and pristine beaches has made the islet an attractive destination for in-the-know divers, snorkelers, and beach-goers.

Misali's waters boast some of Tanzania's highest coral cover and are home to over 350 species of fish and 40 genera of hard corals. The island supports a variety of endemic species including the Pemban vervet monkey, Pemba sun-bird, Pemba white-eye and Pemba flying fox, as

well as endangered species such as coconut crabs and sea turtles, which nest on the island's beaches.

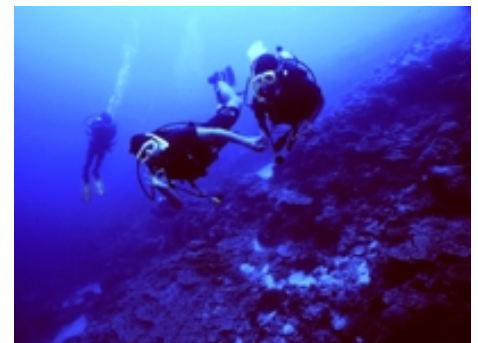
Unfortunately, the unique natural resources and biodiversity of Misali Island have been threatened in recent years. Unregulated fishing and destructive methods such as

dynamite, poison, and finely meshed nets have devastated fish populations and the delicate reef environment that supports them. The government established an official conservation area in 1998, but conventional regulations had little effect on resource use. ▶



Pemban village

قرية بيمبا



Murray's wall

حائط موراي



Murray's wall

حائط موراي

With funding from the MacArthur Foundation, CARE International-Tanzania, a non-governmental organization (NGO), set up a unique conservation project to protect the natural resources of Misali Island that captures the benefit of tourism and harnesses the power of local peoples' fervent adherence to Islam.

The islands of Zanzibar have been an important Indian Ocean trading post for centuries. The unique blend of faces, cuisine and beliefs found on the islands today reflects its history of cultural cross-pollination. Though Zanzibar has been visited by many civilizations including the Chinese, Malay and Indonesians, it is the Persians and Arabs, who both ruled for a time, that have remained the strongest cultural influences. Traders from Arabia brought Islam, which became firmly established by the 11th century.

Misali Island too reflects Zanzibar's historical blend of African and Islamic beliefs. The island gets its name from the word msala, which means "prayer mat" in Swahili.

Misali has also served as a site for spiritual activities such as ancestor healing/divination for centuries. Pre-Islamic beliefs maintain that the island's coral caves are inhabited by spirits who will ensure good health and large catches if left offerings. Older generations still adhere to these traditional beliefs and offerings left at cave openings can be seen today.

CARE realized that the island's spiritual narrative and the fishermen's commitment to Islam could be directed towards

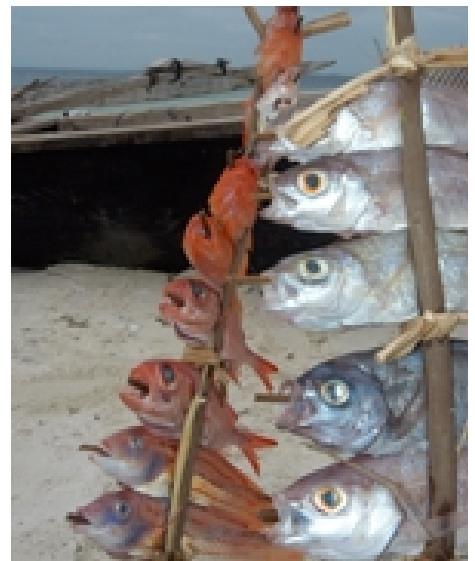
protecting the island's natural resources and improving the fishermen's quality of life. CARE developed the Misali Ethics Project to raise awareness about and popularize the Islamic conservation ethic, making it the first organization in Tanzania to promote conservation through Islamic principles. CARE produced posters, pamphlets, videos, training notes and other materials to aid religious leaders, madarassa school teachers and government officials in fostering Islamic conservation on a local level. The project relies on passages of the Qur'an that scholars have interpreted as teachings about conservation and basic Islamic principles such as unity (tawheed), accountability, and stewardship of nature (khalifa). As 99% of Zanzibaris are Muslim, CARE's Islamic approach has proven far more effective than externally imposed regulations. As one fisherman recently told the BBC: "It is easy to ignore the government, but no one can break God's law."

To further improve the income and food security of fishing villages on Pemba, CARE is training fishermen to act as guides to Misali Island, improving the management of tourism-related revenues, employing a savings and credit scheme, developing a community management system for fishing groups, and teaching sustainable fishing techniques. These strategies encourage sustainable resource use and offer fishers an alternative income source through the economic benefits of ecotourism.

Developing effective strategies for environmental conservation has become

critical for the degraded environment of today's earth, and it has been increasingly recognized that lasting change depends on both the long-term participation and understanding of the communities where conservation is taking place. The use of Islamic beliefs in conservation at Misali Island is a fascinating example of how the ethical principles inherent in Islam can be used to inform choices that better the environment of our planet and the welfare of all mankind. ■

For further information and donation, please write to the Project Manager, Misali Island Conservation and Development Project, P.O. Box 283, Wete, Pemba, Tanzania.



Fishing culture

الأسماك غذاء شعبي



Dhows

الدھو



Dhow off Misali Island

دھو قرب جزيرة ميسالي