

ECHO

[Amani Vanitas]

As someone who has been 'looking North' in most of my research, I felt compelled to, at least for a change, to 'look South'. This was a while back, when Wenzel Geissler got in touch about travelling together to Amani Research Station in Tanzania.

This 'looking' became, over a few months, a contemplation, ... a stunned wondering, as to why and how Amani has become, what it seems to be today: A relic of former colonial times, abandoned and still occupied. However glorious or glorified those times might have been and have become in hindsight: they are testing the dignity and livelihoods of many, past, present and future.

Listening to the ponderings and wonderings of a number of anthropologists along the way, I started to form a picture. A picture, stagnant and still, overlaid with voices and sounds. Voices from ambiguous times and places. All of it in a particular strand of slow motion, or rather more often 'non-motion'.

Fragmented questions intersected the scene ... 'Why are there still hundreds of mice reproducing in a shed to allow the breeder to stay in employment?' 'Who is using the post-office? Or the library?' ... 'You are German, you must know where the gold is!' The gold - what gold!?

Wandering and wondering in the labs and protected forest area around Amani, I let the odd reality that was allowing the research station to be this hybrid, a living dead shell of former purpose, sink in ... When I started taking photographs inside the labs, a strange affinity to Dutch and Flemish Vanitas paintings unfolded. I was looking at still lifes: vessels, jugs, pots, a formerly functional array of plastic, lab-glass, polystyrene and paper records ... often sitting on dark, ... very dark wood.

Have any of the regularly passing school kids ever even seen this 'still' world? If it wasn't for the daily routines and goings-on around these 'still-lives', what would we find in their place? Or: what would be left of them? If it wasn't for the government funding, protecting Amani as a colonial memorial, or a post-colonial remainder and reminder, it would most likely be looted, fall apart, overgrow and eventually disappear. Yet, there is still a post-office, various administration offices, even a functioning malaria test lab for the locals and of course the guesthouse we inhabited.

Why did it feel so different and subtly uncomfortable to be served three meals a day in Amani than anywhere else I have been?! Difficult to shrug off the exclusive, inherited position we were in here.

Vanitas is the Latin for vanity, in the sense of 'emptiness' or a 'worthless action'. In the arts, *Vanitas* is a type of symbolic work of art, associated especially with still life painting in Flanders and the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th centuries.

But: here were no skulls, hourglasses, extinguished candles or rotting fruit; just the archived, disintegrating insects, dry rats and some moth-eaten curtains? Were the polystyrene cups taking place of the skull? Were they empty and worthless? – or ... actually stand for former wealth and incoherent values?

'Realm of Knowledge and Silence': a sign in the Amani library echoed around my head. The 'freeze-frame-situations' in the labs and cupboards talk about the evanescence of *our* existence, there, and here.

By the time we left, I could not decide which part of the situation was more impenetrable or maybe less entangled: it's past times, it's current state or it's future in our imagination.

Mariele Neudecker