



The 'Blue Kuku' in Shanzu

On the coast of Kenya and deep inside the poorer end of *Shanzu* – an informal settlement – I was drawn to a cartoon-like, bright blue chicken, and the name *Blue Kuku Café*, which adorned one of the shop fronts. Knowing kuku was Kiswahili for chicken, and feeling peckish, I ventured inside.



The dusty uneven road outside the cafe was bordered by ramshackle buildings of gnarled wood and rusty iron. In the rainy season, rushing waters had deposited sands, which now dry, assumed a golden colour. As I entered, *Rhumba*, a local teacher, was busy scraping up the deposit for his concrete mix, whilst declaring (with a certain degree of irony):

“God is so good to us people here in Shanzu; see how he gives us all this free sand!”

My lunch that day was a delicious meal of chapati and maharagwe (chapati and beans), costing 50 cents. At intervals (when she was free) I began chatting with Lucy the manager.



She tells me the working day begins around sunrise with cleaning the café, then cooking *mahamri*, a spicy donut-type delicacy. After that there is a sequence to the foods and drinks cooked as the day progresses, Mahamri being followed in the

morning by chapati and masala chai, then to more substantial dishes of meat, fish, or beans, accompanied by rice and greens for lunch or dinner. It can be hot of course in this tropical environment, but the diners are used to it.

“Hakuna matata,” (no worries) they say, “We know this heat; your cafe is no different!”

The dining area boasts a large iconic *Blue Kuku* mural, to amuse those sampling the affordable foods, the idea stolen from a cornflakes packet! It’s a simple place, when compared with up-market restaurants on the nearby beachfront. However, the locals consider it a cool place to ‘chill’ (in the heat!), one of them, an undeniably rotund lady, remarking:



“Please give me another plate of those deeeelicious chips. I can’t bear to leave this place and go home to my house; Blue Kuku is toooo beautiful!”



At either end of the day the surrounds seem to exude a special kind of ambience: in the early morning, as the street awakens; then at dusk when the humidity seems to rebound for a while, bringing with it a languid and relaxed atmosphere. This twilight time is special for locals, when they drop by for a snack, to rest and tell their stories. In the evening, children sit in the middle of the road, playing in the sand, as *boda bodas* (motorbike taxis) beep and steer around them. Young ladies, colourfully dressed, stand in groups chatting and laughing; men hold hands, discussing highlights of their day in more hushed tones.

But of course, it's not all like that. At times we need to replace our rose-coloured glasses with very clear and unblinkered lenses. For the fact is, that most people in this Shanzu settlement live in dire poverty, existing close to the edge of a precipice; never knowing when they might disappear over the edge, towards an even worse situation.



Lucy, the Blue Kuku manager, with staff.

(photos by Duncan Gregory)

And in truth, there is no effective safety net!

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Backgrounder for The Blue Kuku

Shanzu Village is an impoverished area – officially known as an informal settlement, commonly termed a slum – on the outskirts of Mombasa, not far from the glorious beaches on Kenya’s coast. The area is home to about 20,000 people: locals from the Girriama community, but also those with allegiance to other tribes, from many different parts of the country. They come to the coast for a variety of reasons, but predominantly to secure an income related to the tourist industry.

Not far from ‘the village’ but closer to the beachfront, are to be found substantial, even at times luxurious houses owned by the rich: expats from overseas or wealthy locals, while along the beaches are a wide range of tourist hotels, restaurants, and bars. The poorer people from the other side of the track (a road running North-South, in actuality acts as a dividing line between rich and poor) provide the labour and small businesses required by the rich houses and tourist hotels.

People from the slum clean the houses and hotels, and cook the food, which comes at much higher prices than they can afford themselves to pay. They need to source their food at far cheaper rates, which is where a small business like the Blue Kuku Café comes in to play, with food as simple fare and the prices mostly below one dollar for each meal. The café like many other businesses in the village survives on long hours and low margins, but it does provide a small income for the owner and its staff.

In reality the café attracts a mix of customers, all with their own issues to deal with, when faced with living in constant poverty. Many have the communal aspects of religious belief (mainly Muslim or Christian) from which they derive support, at least on a weekly basis. But aside from all the negative matters of daily life, some also come with an inbuilt positiveness, families to cherish and gossip to rejoice in, perhaps buoyed by their community and places to lift their spirits, such as Blue Kuku.