

MREMBO

SWAHILI STYLE BEAUTY

By Stefanie Schoetz

Like everywhere in the world, the “wellness” phenomenon has taken over the island of Zanzibar. Spas are popping up across the island in the hotels often run by Thai therapists, offering a dizzying choice of treatments. However, Zanzibar and Pemba have

a wealth of rich, traditional beauty rituals, using indigenous herbs, flowers and spices. If you want to try something different, head over to Mrembo on Cathedral Street in Stone Town for a Zanzibari experience.

One of the beauty treatments offered at Mrembo is called *singo*, a natural scrub traditionally used when a Zanzibar girl is preparing for her marriage. *Singo* is prepared from fresh jasmine, ylang ylang flowers, rose petals, mpatchori (not the famous patchouli but a sweet smelling herb growing mainly on Unguja), mpompia (geranium), mrehani (sweet basil) and liwa (sandalwood) ground together in a “Kinu” blender with a little rosewater. The bride to be undergoes a daily *singo*, the scrub exfoliating her skin, leaving her fragrant and glowing, with skin as soft as silk.

On Pemba, couples scrub each other at the same time; men rub their beloved with *singo*,

while women use the invigorating clove based scrub known as *vidonge* for their husband. *Vidonge* are made from the remains of clove stems and buds, after they have been distilling to make clove oil. The stems and buds are pressed into a small ball, with a little rose water. The result is a coarse, warming scrub, leaving skin energized and fresh. The *vidonge* is said to increase men’s libido and stamina and could be a perfect gift to take home.

Swahili massage treatments include hot sand massage and *kukandwa*. In a hot sand massage, sand is heated and tied into a muslin parcel, then applied to the skin to alleviate pain or inflammation, opening the pores and bringing a medicinal heat to the muscles. Elderly Swahili people use the old, traditional massage *kukandwa* using *mbarika* leaves (castor seed). The leaves are soaked in hot water prior to applying them, which opens up the



Preparing *singo*

pores and relieves post natal fatigue, sport injuries and exhaustion.

Henna is also an important beauty ritual on the archipelago of Unguja and Pemba and is made of the dried leaves of the henna tree. Nowadays many places unfortunately use the very aggressive *piko* which has absolutely nothing to do with natural henna and is actually nothing more than hair dye. Real henna painting takes time, with Zanzibari patterns combining elements from Arabic, Indian and African styles. The henna

powder is mixed with black tea and lime juice to retrieve a darker color and must be applied at least twice to get a good result.

At Mrembo Traditional Spa, you can try most of these little known and 100% natural treatments, which make you feel relaxed and fulfilled. You will also be able to spend an entire day pampering yourself with various treatments, sip ginger/lemongrass tea, and learn about Henna and other Zanzibari beauty traditions, whilst listening to the melodious sounds of Taarab music.