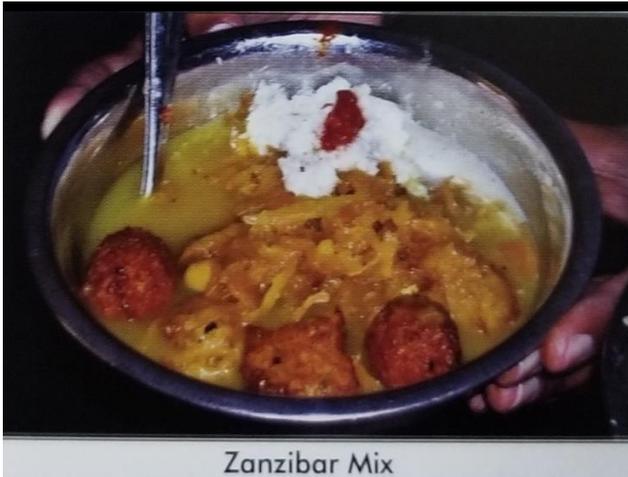


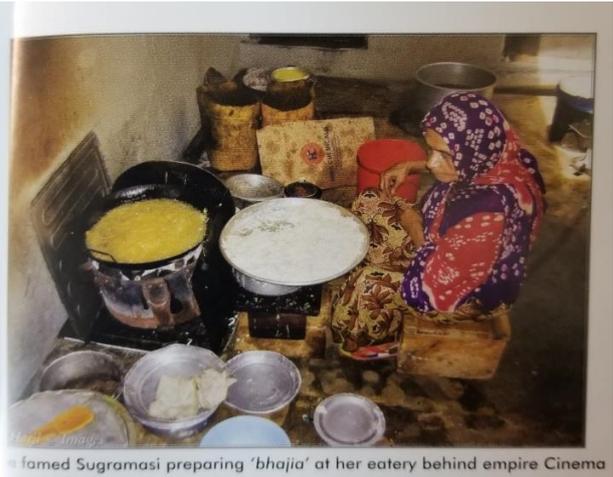
# THE ZANZIBAR VENDORS, EATERIES & ARTISANS



By Abdulrazak Fazal Updated: October 2020



Zanzibar Mix



famed Sugramasi preparing 'bhajia' at her eatery behind empire Cinema

Today wherever you visit East Africa you will come across stalls selling “bajia & mbatata wa rojo” dubbed “Zanzibar mix”. Who among the elder Zanzibaris does not remember Ali (the Mshihiri seller) carrying bajia and coconut chutney in a wooden box and hawking “Adanda!” to sell his bantias. The plain bantias, pilipili za(chillies) bantias and biringani (brinjal) bantias of his were adored by one and all. They were prepared by Shirinbai Premji (a Khoja Ithnashri lady, Mohamedali Premji’s wife and Toti’s mother) who resided in the Ali Nathoo gully of Malindi. Ali worked for her since his childhood in the 1930s and later joined hands in its preparation.

Bhajia made of daal is a typical Kutchi Muslim snack. In Zanzibar, many ladies with low income ran their household on such activities. They were referred to as ‘Masi. We had several Masis who dealt in bantias. The other favourite was ‘Masi Bajia’ (also a Khoja Ithnaasheri lady, Mrs. Kurumbai Gulamhusain Sheriff, Jaffer Bajia’s mother) whose residence or eatery was behind Sheriff Dewji’s house and beside Jacksi’s residence. There was also this ‘Memon Masi’ (mother of Siddiq, Ilyas and Majid) opposite the Ali Nathoo house who made delicious bantias. Later along there in Malindi emerged Kiwapi, an African lady, whose bantias were of a totally different caliber altogether. While bajia was a Kutchi snack the coconut chutney served with it was purely a Zanzibar’s variety. There were several other Sunni Masis in the stone town around Mkunazini, Sokomohogo, Vuga and other places. There was Hawabai

in Mchambawima and the famous Sugrabai behind the Empire Cinema. Sugrabai passed away only recently and the business is now run by her family members.

The other famous vendor was Adnan. Adnan's "mbatata wa rojo" had a taste of its own. His children have now taken over the business but that instinct taste is missing. School children would rush towards him on his arrival at the ESM school yard. His rojo was just out of this world. Talking of "mbatata wa rojo" reminds of Mama Tausi who was Mulla Bai Amina's maid. She would sit with her "ware" on the pavement outside the Peera Champsi building selling her specialty. Her rojo was extraordinarily good. The African lady Ma Zena used to sell mbatata ya ukwaju (tamarind) at Majanini, opposite the M.D. Kermali mansion. She was also famous for her 'uji wa khunde'. Then there was Abedi (Mshihiri) in Malindi. His 'mix' was one of its own, papuri sprinkled over bajia and mbatata.. He prepared it during morning hours and his eatery would be packed with customers. Another 'mix' specialist was Kasu, a Khoja Ismaili. He went around the town with his hand cart. He was very popular with the ESM school students who loved his "chana bateta". Also, Hassanali Visram (Hashnu Muri) along Majestic Cinema was well known for his "mbatata and ndizi ya rojo". Opposite his shop was the popular African mishikaki (roasted meat) seller. The public loved his extremely tender meat and the delicious taste when the small mishikaki stick was dipped into a container filled with hot chillies.

The unforgettable Zanzibar ghubiti was a unique sugar candy introduced by the Kutchi Sunni called Ahmed Ghubitwaro who hailed from Kutch Bhuj. He used to carry a metal tray like the one used for cakes and biscuits. It consisted of varieties of ghubitis but the favourite of most was the white one which was hard, and its lumps and chunks had to be cut into pieces with a metallic piece. The African Juma Chakli used to work for him and learned the trade. Later he left him and started preparing his own variety. He moulded the candy into a spiral pattern and also made the soft chewy gum type sweet that was wrapped around a wooden rod. He was very popular with the children who followed him wherever he went hawking "Aa Chinu Chakli" in order to sell his candy. He would pull the gum or pluck the 'chakli' and sell to these children.

The Bohora Khanbhai's daria khali (opposite the Ahmed Lakha mansion on Tharia St.) was the ladies favourite. He squeezed lime over daria (gram) mixed with red powder chillies. There was another Bohora called Babra who used to make tasty 'twisted hard ganthia'. And the blind Taherbhai who went around hawking "khunazi tamu pepeta lamu" to sell chana bor (dried cherries) and pepeta . There were 'juguwara' like Chacha Janu (Janmohamed Kermalli, a Khoja Ithnaasheri) and several Washihiris who moved with handcarts selling jugu and other nuts. Alibhai (a Kutchi Sunni) near Noors in Mkunazini used to sell ice cream on his cart as well as 'sacha hira' (barafu ya kugonga na rangi ya sharbati juu). The small ice cream cup cost five cents. Wow! just imagine the cost/standard of living, purchasing power and profit level then.

Ice cream sellers were Habib Peera (Hathiar), Taki Juma (Darajani), Hussein Juma of 'Hussein Tea Room' (Mchambawima), Gulamali Nathho at Empire Cinema amongst a few others. Habib Peera's 'fruit icecream' was Zanzibar's specialty. The elders gathered for "mazungumzo" outside his stall at Forodhani.

At times even HH the Aga Khan (Sultan Mohamed Shah) would join the gathering. Habib was a great jester and it is said that Sultan Sayed Khalifa often called him over to his palace for a chit chat session. In the late 1950s Musa G. Dhalla had obtained the rights to deal in Walls (the famous UK ice cream brand) which became quite popular in Zanzibar. Bakeries was the domain of Goans.

The first bakery was introduced by the Goan Almeidas, and thus Zanzibar inherited the Portuguese 'Pau bread' and not the English sliced boflo (loaf). Hassan Bakery (Sunni Kokni at Mkunazini) was known for its toasts. The old man Farhad went around the stone town early in the mornings delivering bread. In the month of Ramadhan the humble Dharamsi, Yusuf (Mafatuma), Mohamedali and Gulamali all were carrying metallic trays on their heads going around from street to street hawking "Naan garam naan".

Ishak Chaki introduced his unique 'mitho paan'. Everything 'red' went inside it (red coconut, red supari beetle nut and red syrup). He stationed himself at Forodhani placing the paan on an ice block. In those days, ice could be obtained from the Patwa factory at Mkunazini or Shapoorji's at Darajani for peanuts. Chaki's paan stall won the first prize award at the fare at the Agakhan Club in Sateni during the Diamond Jubilee celebrations. He was awarded a 100 shilling note from HH the Aga Khan Sultan Mohamed Shah himself, considered a lot of money in those days. One Kassambha had brought a sugar cane pressing machine from India and daily pushed it all the way from Mkunazini to Forodhani selling 'maji ya miwa'. Ndizi ya rojo was the specialty of a Bohora person who would come to Forodhani with his handcart. The African fresh juice seller Saidi's "maajiya machungua, ukwaju and ndimu" were enchanting and had a highly refreshing effect. Mohamedhusain Virji (Mamdhu Bi) had his 'barafu' stall beside the 'Imambara'. Those chunks of ukwaju, machungwa and maziwa were everyone's favourite. He also cycled all the way to Mtoni and Shariff Musa selling malai (barafu or ice lolly).

In the early days the mixture made up of small dried coconut pieces (mbata or copra), tiny green leaves and sopari (beetlenut) was termed "masalo". It was chewed as a breath freshener, stuffed in paan and offered to guests during weddings. Later, around the time of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, a special recipe of masalo was introduced, made by Mrs. Rubabbai Kassamali Jaffer, residing in the back lane of Malindi. It was made from sugary coconut chips of various colours and thus termed 'coronation masalo', which is popular to this very day. Today's variety of East African food mostly emanates from Zanzibar. Those elderly Zanzibaris fond of food always give mention to Zanzibar cuisine and recall Maruki's "halua ya Mmanga", Haji Omar Ishak's "halua ya badamu", Haji Omar Adam's "pera", Fakhri's "jalebi", Ashur's "mandazi", Washihiris' "mkate wa mofa" and "bokho

bokho”, Afro Arab specialty like “khuku/samaki wakupaka”, “kalimati”, “mkate yakumimina” and “kitumbua”.

**By Abdulrazak Fazal**

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