

MALINDI STREET, ZANZIBAR



By Abdulrazak Fazal *Updated: October 2020*



In a household more attuned to Kutchi/Gujarati literature I had come to terms with my mediocre command of English language. Fortunately, I found a saviour, to an extent, in the form of VS Naipaul. My first experience of him was more than 50 years ago when I read 'MIGUEL STREET' recommended by my King George vi School teacher Maalim Ali Farsi, himself a Masters in English Literature from Oxford University. Though not comprehending it fully then I did make an effort to grasp its essence. It made me visualize my own neighbourhood of Malindi that was a lively street accommodating all sorts of amusing characters.

I was born in a house on the Kiponda motorway opposite the Ithnashri imambara at the far end of Malindi Street in Zanzibar that otherwise abounds in narrow streets, gullies and alleys. The stonetown's peculiar houses opposite each other within earshot had shops downstairs and dwellings above them. My father opened our shop downstairs early in the morning. His first obligation was to recite 'quran'. At night, a few elders gathered in the shop and the discussion revolved around religious and

communal affairs. A small room inside the shop was partitioned and rented to Jaffer Jeraj who earned his livelihood selling peppermints and chocolates. As a child I must have tasted all the varieties that he displayed in his glass bottles. In today's time we hardly find those varieties though some of them were traceable in London's Woolworth stores. Beside the peppermint shop on the motorway was Hassanali Juma Sumar's 'mithai' (Indian sweets & confectionery) shop.

At the back of my house on the motorway in the 40s and 50s was a Hindu carpenter's shop and behind it an open shrubby land with a huge baobab tree (mbuyu) and a couple of old ruined graves (makaburi). The Zanzibarians commonly termed such places 'mbuyuni' or 'makaburini' and associated them with ghostly spirits (mashetani). Later the carpenter's shop was dismantled, the shrubs cleared and in its place School Fez (Ithnashri School) stepped in.

Alongside the house was Abhu Ladak's house/shop. Abhu was seen all the time in his 'lungi' and 'chakhri' (wooden sandals). His wife Bai Jhena regularly travelled to her maternal home in Mombasa. Incidentally during one of her visits she passed away there. Abhu became all alone. In Bai Jhena's absence Abhu would take his early morning tea and meals at a nearby Mshihiri restaurant. Once all of a sudden Abhu disappeared. The entire neighbourhood became concerned, even the Mshihiri restaurant owner reported that Abhu was missing for the past two days. Poor Abhu's door had to be broken down. Sadly, he was found lying dead. Immediately the body had to be taken away and buried without much of the funeral rites. A sad end to an otherwise nice and simple person. Abhu had an elderly son Kasu who lived apart. Kasu was in the dhow business and known as 'Kasu Nahoza'. Abed Karume also in the same business was Kasu's close friend. Later Honourable Karume became the ASP leader and eventually Zanzibar's President.

Right opposite us were the 'Bohoras'. Theirs was a matriarchal household and the old lady Rematmasi being the family head. We referred to her as 'Moti Ma'. She was almost 80 years of age but in full control of the house. Her elderly children and grandchildren were all in awe of her. Moti Ma's waistcoat pocket was filled with 'sopari' (betelnut) and daily she would pass on a piece to me, and my eventual addiction to it. The top of their building was as good as a roof garden with plenty of tins planted with 'asmini' (jasmine flowers) and roses that they plucked early in the morning. Daily the African ladies visited them to buy 'asmini' and roses. The granddaughter Ratan was smart and attended the Government Secondary School for girls. She provided private tuition in English and Arithmetic to me and some other children. My brother Husain and I would be invited to their house on the occasion of 'dareez' (a holy Bohora feast) and we were made to sit in a circle around a 'thal' (a large platter) containing various delicacies. The 'Bohoras' are very much traditional and as soon as we sat around the 'thaal' Moti Ma would stealthily drop the Bohora hat on our heads.

Next door stayed Hassanali Allarakhia (Mshambara). He had a big gramophone that attracted me a lot. His collection of records included Mohamed Rafi's 'parvar digare alam' from the film 'Hatim Tai' and the 'Chori Chori' Lata/Manna De duet 'yeh raat bhighi bhighi' that were my favourites. At night i would go to their house to listen to my favourite numbers. Hassanali's son Murad was of my age and quite mischievous. In the month of Ramadhan we operated a 'lucky dip' stall downstairs attracting passersby to play it by paying ten cents. The prizes offered were a small circular mirror, pocket comb, soap tablet and such petty items. In the late afternoon after closing the stall we would count the cash and then rush to buy another lot at a wholesale price venturing into next day's 'bahati nasibu'. In the evening Murad climbed up on his 'banda' (roof top) to fly a kite. The playful Murad grew up to be a smart and handsome lad riding his sports bicycle as girls swooned over him. Now in his seventies he is into a bicycle business in Toronto, Canada.

In the corner was Mulla Yusuf Nathani's house/shop. People from the other end of Malindi on their way to the mosque had made his shop a junction and indulged in chatting with the chatty Mulla as he chewed his 'paan' with relish. At night the shop transformed into a hangout for the sons Maadhi and Baacha's youthful friends. Their topic of discussion varied from ZNP's new agenda to Saturday's football match featuring Malindi or the Ithnashries and Arabs' cricket matches during the weekend. Later around midnight the friends dispersed but not before targeting someone or the other around there and fuming him with anger.

A bit further was the Mshihiri Faraj's shop sewing straw mats (mkeka) and baskets (kikapu). Faraj's sons Nassor and Abdulla were great football enthusiasts. During the Gossage tournament we gathered around his shop to listen to the Kiswahili football commentary on the radio, and in between the sons providing their expert comments.

Along there was the 'Bewakhana' (House for widows) where resided the Ithnashri widows with no kith and kin. One of them was the limping but sharp Bai Fattu ('Fatu Panga Wazi') who often got hold of me to send out for something or the other. The 'Bewakhana' ladies quarreling with each other was a common occurrence. At times the whole neighbourhood would be awakened in the middle of the night by a commotion heard from their end. At times I visited the 'bewakhana' to greet the three Rashid Jetha sisters (Baapa Panwara) who also visited us regularly. Once theirs was a rich household. The old man Rashid Jetha and the eldest son Habib held my dad in high regard, and he had become their confidant. My sister Zainab when a kid had named the old man 'Baapa Pan' as he would offer 'paan' (betel leaf) to her after applying on it lime paste and betel nuts that he carried in his small silver box. The sisters thus were 'Baapa Panwara' to us. Circumstantially they became hard pressed, and sadly in the aftermath of the Revolution languished into ill health and oblivion.

In the far end corner was the prominent Sheriff Dewji household. Their forefather Dewji Jamaal had been instrumental in leading us to secede from the mainstream Khoja Ismaili sect. At the back was the Sheriff Dewji ivory workshop where the

workers removed dirt off the tusks to clean the ivory. They also donated glycerin in small bottles. In the month of Ramadhan, I regularly attended 'darsa' held at their place. In the post Revolution years, the family became scattered. The family patriarch was Mohamed Sheriff Dewji. While in Bombay I occasionally received his letters from Karachi addressing me as 'My dear little boy from Malindi' that I found quite moving. The eldest son Abdul Sheriff had been Professor of History and remains attached to Zanzibar becoming Curator of its Museum.

Along there on our way to the Khoja dispensary through a lane was a spot where the Washihiri (Yemenis) gathered to carry out a certain process. This was applying brass cones on their back. It seemed strange and unusual to me. Later on, I learnt that this was to draw out stagnant and dysfunctional blood to the surface cleansing them of any illness. They also indulged in hookah smoking that was their favourite pastime. The Washihiris and Ithnashries dominated Malindi. The Washihiris grounded coffee seeds at nighttime when our vicinity of Malindi smelled its sharp fragrance. During daytime with their brass 'dele' (cone shaped container) and small cups in their waist coats they went from street to street selling black coffee. There were some notorious characters too. The older boys cautioned us to keep away from a couple of them, Marwaga and Karama, who were said to be paedophiles. Several gullies and alleys traversed Malindi and where you could find children playing tennis ball cricket, 'sokodiko' (marbles), 'kiditi' or 'nage'.

Right across Mulla Yusuf's shop along the street that converged on the main Malindi route was a dingy fruit shop of one red tarboosh hat wearing Mshihiri Sayedi. Inside his shop was a bit of space where he had placed his primitive furniture including a rope bed. His shop featured bottles of peppermints and fruits like bananas and oranges. At times the shop would stink of rotten fruits as they had been lying for days. At night Sayedi lit 'kibatari' and his shop remained open till midnight. Another Mshihiri near there was Abedi who owned a restaurant selling 'bajia & mbatata' with 'papuri' sprinkled over it. Abedi's restaurant would be packed with customers during morning time. In the evening he prepared 'sambosa', 'kababu', and 'chevro'. Opposite Sayedi was Sherali Jessa who would be all the time engrossed in reading books. His sons were in indenting business. His wife Bai Sakku (Sukari Mawe) was my mother's great pal. She climbed up her roof terrace daily in the morning to chat with my mother, the Bohora roof garden separating the two. Sadly, Bai Sakku along with some members of her family became victims of a tragic 1970 sea accident in Daressalaam.

Beside the Jessas was a Goan tailoring shop, a common feature in the stonetown but unusual in our vicinity of Malindi. Antao's was the only Goan family in Malindi. When his wife died almost the entire Goan community from the other end of the stone town turned up in Malindi. The funeral took place sometime in the afternoon. It was probably the first funeral of its kind that Malindi was witnessing. It had brought our side of Malindi to a standstill as all of us stood along there to watch the funeral pass by. There was sombreness about it. The cortege was led by a pole bearer

followed by a black cart with wreaths laid over it, and then the family members carrying the coffin over their shoulders. The mourners, gents as well as ladies, in their black attire walked behind in dignified manner chanting funeral hymns. That reminds me of the death of community members in the middle of the night in Malindi. The 'mayyat' would be carried out in 'jeneza' to the imambara at that odd hour and in the still of the night awakening us by the frightful cry of 'kalema'.

Opposite the Goans lived a widow Bai Khati Mongi with her son Fidahusain petnamed Mithu and who everyone referred to as 'Mithu Khati Mongi'. Mithu's friend was Yusuf Kermalli (Shufu). The two involved themselves in the mosque's voluntary work. In particular I have vivid memories of Shufu correcting my ablution rituals at the mosque and making me perform it again and again. Earlier at the 'Khati Mongi' house lived the old man Ali Satchu who was in his nineties. He seemed obsessed with his pocket watch and kept winding it again and again. He often came to our shop to check the time on our wall clock. In those days wrist watches were not common. In Malindi we had a clock repairer, Hussain Dhalla (Gariali), who spoke in jest. Whenever Ali Satchu and Gariali met they created a hilarious situation. Ali Satchu's grandson Kassamali Chandu stayed with the old man. He went on to become our teacher at the Secondary School after graduating from the States. Eventually Maalim Kassamali became well known for his humanitarian activities in Zanzibar.

Along there in Malindi was Hussain Fajju (Madawa) who stayed with his elder brother and sister. He worked in the Khoja hospital dispensing medicine. He was a great sports enthusiast, Malindi being his favourite football team and in cricket he supported the Ithnashries. At times we returned from the stadium together and if Malindi had lost he would endlessly utter expletives. His best friend was one Mohamed 'Mandazi'. It was real fun watching the two during the final stages of an Ithnashri match. They turned their backs praying for God's mercy and reverting to the scene after the ball had been delivered.

Further down was the Ali Nathoo mansion. Their household was held in high esteem as the old man had his contributions. He refused the knighthood offered to him by the British Government but instead opted for a 10th Muharram 'public holiday'. The Ali Nathoo shop was run by his youngest son Abdulla who was popularly known as 'Chacha Ali Nathoo'. He was in indent business and imported balloons that could be seen hanging in the Ali Nathoo shop. Chacha in his long coat, red tarboosh hat and thick glasses would be mostly accompanied by his entourage of friends when he went out. His nephew Ahmed (Hamdhu) was amusing and had his very own brand of humour. He was an expert cook and being a good friend of my cousin he at times dropped in at our house to prepare custard and jam buns. In the corner stood out Mze Juma's (Hassanali Juma) house. The old man dealt in clove and copra business and had several sons who excelled at reciting 'dua', playing cricket and also held good positions in Government jobs.

The Mshihiri Ashur lived in the gully across there. He was an expert in cooking 'mandazi' and we often went to buy his 'mandazi' in the mornings. He also had his small shop at the other end where in the evening he prepared 'mixed fruit' and orange juice. He was a staunch Malindi fan and whenever Malindi won he freely distributed a glass of fruit or juice. Beside Ashur's was the shop of twin Chinese faced Mshihiri brothers with squinty eyes, Sayad Dahwal, from whom I daily bought my bread. The brothers looked alike, and it was difficult distinguishing one from the other. The Awadh Nassor restaurant with marble decorated hexagon shaped tables was around there. It was the hub of Malindi football Club where they displayed their trophies (League, Zanzibar and Coronation) or the Ithnashries displayed their gigantic cup when they won the KJ cricket tournament. I used to buy 'mkate wa ajem' over here. The tandoor clay oven for baking the 'ajam' was at the top and we had to climb the narrow stairs. They also made 'mkate wa samli' if we placed our order in advance and took along some ghee in a cup. That 'mkate wa samli' was really good, much better than today's so called 'Indian/Pakistani butter naan'.

Opposite Awadh Nassor was Mussa Dhalla, a prominent businessman, who had introduced the English brand 'Walls' ice cream in Zanzibar. His vendors on tricycles with ice boxes containing the Walls varieties cycled their way from one end to the other. Otherwise, we were used to obtaining the ice lolly chunks of 'ukwaju', 'machungua' or 'maziwa' from Mamdu Bi's (Mohamedhusain Virji) 'barafu stall' across my house. It was also a favourite hangout for the youngsters. Just there along Mamdu Bi's 'barafu stall' was the famous 'barza imamwaro', the long stretching pavement outside the mosque, where the Ithnashri community members gathered for 'mazungumzo' (talks). Opposite the mosque was the small barber shop of 'Toto Hajam' who would cut hair and provide the latest gossips.

Across the motorway was the Nathani House where Maulana Jabir Hassan and his family lived. Maulana was 'pesh imam' at the mosque. One incident that remains etched in my memory was Maulana sending a 'taweez' to my sister Zainab on the morning of her wedding for her protection. That was a noble gesture on his part. Sadly, the rift within the community led to his departure from Zanzibar. Maulana was given a grand send off by his allies who garlanded him and accompanied him in a procession that passed through Malindi on its way to the port where he boarded the BI liner to take him back to his native place.

The Nathani house accommodated several shops. One of them was the Takim Travel Service that faced my house. Its window display of toy aeroplanes held special fascination for passersby who would gather there. They were also attracted by the colourful budgies in a birdcage displayed by Aliraza Nathani, nicknamed Ali Bom, in the small Takim adjoining shop allotted to him. Later Nathani got himself involved in ZNP's politics. He had even placed a replica of red 'jogo' (a cock) that was ZNP's symbol on his car and moved around chanting "Umma hai, voti umpeni jogo." Poor Nathani was arrested in the aftermath of the Revolution and imprisoned.

The wind of change in the wake of Zanzibar's Revolution transformed Malindi that once was the ZNP stronghold. Its inhabitants dispersed. Occasionally when I visit Zanzibar I put up at 'Safari Lodge' that is located in Malindi to relive the past that comes flooding back but Malindi now bears a forlorn look. It is saddening to see the once bustling stretch of Malindi along my house in its present ghost town state.

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