

THE ZANZIBAR OLD FORT



By Abdulrazak Fazal *Updated: August 2020*



► [Wikipedia on Old Fort](#)

The Zanzibar Old Fort brings back many memories of the old colonial days. As children we went to Forodhani almost daily and the Old Fort along there was one of the most noticeable features besides the Sultan's palace and Beit el Ajayab. The fort very much resembles Mombasa's Fort Jesus that had been built by the Portuguese. It is said that even the Zanzibar fort had been built by them but before its completion the Arabs invaded it and eventually saw its construction through to the finish. Hence it is referred to as Old Fort or Portuguese Fort or Arab Fort.

One of the memorable events held at the Old Fort was the annual 'HUSAIN DAY' at night. It was awaited with great anxiety and enthusiasm. The entire fort was illuminated with bright lights and a 'shamiana', marquee and a high dais with steps erected. People from Zanzibar's various communities poured in at the fort occupying the wooden chairs while children were made to sit on the mats spread on the floor. The occasion was in commemoration of Imam Husain's martyrdom and observed with solemnity and religious fervor. It was graced by the Sultan, his Royal family, the British Resident, various Foreign Diplomats and other dignitaries including the heads of various communities. They were received at the gate of the Old Fort and escorted to their seats. The public stood up to welcome the Sultan and the British Resident who were then made to sit in the front row on the antique chairs and sofa sets. Various eminent speakers climbed up the dais to deliver their speeches. The proceedings were broadcast live over 'Sauti Ya Unguja'. Towards the end of the program the gathering was treated to creamy milk (sharbati ya maziwa) with almonds and pistachio in it.

The Old Fort also reminds of the occasional fete held there. The childhood memory of its exciting fun fair rides, games and food stalls, tombola and in particular its musical programs on Saturdays in the late evening is still vivid. The likes of Babu Ali, Indu Khatau, Bhanu and Noorali Dedhar sang the Indian melodies. The Rahim & Kanga boys danced 'Rock & Roll' and the audience applauded tumultuously. Also, the Elvis Presley and Cliff Richard numbers were played amidst huge roar and crowd cheer. The fort also reminds of the 'Wall of Death' ('motno kuwo) made of wooden planks featuring a motorcyclist who performed all sorts of stunts.

The ladies of the different Women's Associations held functions of their various events at the fort. It also formed a venue for the girls' netball practices and matches. Even Girl Guide and Brownies conducted their activities inside the fortress.

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