Ntsambu: the foul smell of home

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Draft paper for Food and Migration Workshop, SOAS, 2/3rd February 2009
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“When you go to Comoro, bring me back some ladu. Ladu, and shihondo, and putu.”

Rather perversely, I begin this paper about one type of food with a quote about others. Travelling from Zanzibar to Ngazidja,¹ one of the Comoro Islands, in mid-2007, I asked a friend—a Zanzibari of Comorian origin who hadn’t been to the Comoros for 30 years—whether he wanted me to bring anything back for him. “Ladu”, he said. “When you go to Comoro, bring me back some ladu. Ladu, and shihondo, and putu.”

What is remarkable about the list that my friend—let’s call him Abdulrazak—gave me is that they are all foods: ladu are rock-hard billiard-ball-sized cakes made of rice, sugar and ghee, and flavoured with pepper and cardamom. Shihondo are also cakes of a sort, similar to what is known in American as peanut brittle; while putu is a hot chilli sauce. Abdulrazak did not ask me to bring back a letter from his brother, or an item of clothing (a kofo, perhaps, the embroidered bonnet for which the island is renowned), or a copy of the local newspaper, or any of a number of things that I might have found in Ngazidja that are not, or not easily available in Zanzibar. He specifically requested food, even though he was not particularly hungry.

Although I was vaguely aware of the importance of foods in constructing identities among migrant populations—Chinese restaurants, Italian fiestas, Lebanese picnics—as we talked about the foods he wanted I realised that there was more to his request than a simple nostalgia for the foods of his youth. The three different foods had three very different types of meaning for him, which I suppose should have been obvious to me from the start—otherwise why ask for three different ones when one would have sufficed?

Being both cooked and heavily spiced, ladu is a food that keeps particularly well and consequently was a common provision on the long dhow trips that travellers undertook in times past: be it a two day sail to Zanzibar or a longer voyage along the African coast, ladu could be packed, a ready to eat snack, in a traveller’s baggage. Ladu is therefore symbolic of the voyage, of the multilocal dimension of Indian Ocean existence and, I suspect, more deeply representative of the ambiguity and the liminality of the voyage itself: neither here nor there, but in transit, with all the implications of regret, longing, nostalgia, excitement, fear, trepidation and, yes, sea-sickness. What an emotion-filled little ball of rice flour!

¹The largest of the Comoro Islands, and the one on which I have carried out the bulk of my research, is known as Ngazidja in Shingazidja (the local language); Grande Comore in French; Great Comoro (although rarely) in English; and simply Comoro among Zanzibaris, including those of Comorian origin. Most Zanzibaris of Comorian origin are from this island. In this paper I will call the island Ngazidja but will use “Comorian” both as noun and adjective in all cases. This should not be taken as suggesting that practices discussed here are common to all islands: I am specifically referring to Ngazidja.
Shihondo had, for Abdulrazak, a different bundle of memories. Shihondo is not particularly representative of travelling; on the contrary, it represents immobility: shihondo is a sweet, fragile and fickle, that needs to be eaten fairly rapidly lest it disintegrate, causing all sorts of sticky disasters. Unlike ladu, shihondo is a static food, emblematic of a very specific space, of Ngazidja itself: of sitting on a wall by the market, chewing animatedly with a few friends, a pause in (or a part of?) the daily routine.

The last item on the list, putu, is, on first appearances, not particularly Comorian. Chillies are eaten widely on the African coast, an essential ingredient in the various cuisines (Gujerati, Goan, Swahili) found in Zanzibar and elsewhere. But, as Abdulrazak explained to me, the way the Zanzibaris prepare chillies is not quite the way the Comorians do it and putu, when he can get it, just makes his meals a little bit more tastier than if he ate them with local chillies.

Food and travelling often go together. In my journeys into and through the Indian Ocean, I have often carried foods, and I give two further examples: on my first visit to Zanzibar in 2005, I left Ngazidja with a notebook full of names and telephone numbers in my pocket, and, tucked under my arm, three baguettes, loaves of French bread, fresh from the bakery on the airport road. “Take him some bread,” a Comorian friend had said, speaking of a cousin in Zanzibar whose name he had given me: “Take him some bread and he’ll help you.” And I have done it myself: during my doctoral research I returned to Ngazidja from a Christmas break in Europe with a suitcase that contained, amongst other things, a haggis and two large turnips, ready for a Comorian Burns Night with a select group of friends.

These examples indicate, I think, how foods are replete with meaning, meaning that is layered: some foods are for personal consumption, a private invocation of sentiment, others are—like Abdulrazak’s shihondo and my own haggis—redolent of a sociality, a suggestion of belonging and a wider, shared experience of commensality.

Commensality and belonging

Ngazidja lies some 600 kilometres southeast of Zanzibar, the westernmost of the Comoro Islands. Historical links with the east African littoral and south Arabia were attenuated by almost a century of French colonial rule and two decades of socialism in Zanzibar; but although links with France and (to a lesser extent) Madagascar remain strong, over the past two decades ties have been renewed and strengthened both with Tanzania and Kenya, and with the Arab states (particularly the UAE).

Comorians are Sunni Muslims and follow the Shafi’i madhab almost without exception; furthermore, although the population has its origins in substantial numbers of Bantu-speaking immigrants from the African mainland, most of whom would undoubtedly have been brought to the island as slaves, there is a significant Arab element in the local population, such that Comorians trace their ancestry (real or imagined) to the Arabian peninsula, and specifically to Hadramawt. In 1993 the Comoros were admitted to the Arab League, testimony to a collective skill in pressing historically grounded claims to Arab identity. But while both Arabness and Islam are significant in shaping local perceptions of and claims to identity, there exists an equally strongly, locally grounded Comorian (customary) practice; there is, subsequently, a tension between the two, particularly where the different discourses conflict.
In Ngazidja, eating is a central element of both daily and ritual practice. In common with much of the Arab world, there is a social obligation to feed those who are hungry, guests or neighbours, and those who find themselves in another house at mealtimes will generally be invited to share in the meal. However, it is acknowledged (even, on occasion, explicitly) that the sharing of food is an injunction imposed by Islam and often observed with some reluctance. “Comorians don’t like to share their food,” one young man explained to me. “It’s only because Islam says you must that people do it.”

The principal meal of the day is eaten at midday, after the noon prayer. Comorians generally aspire to eating rice (ntshole when raw, mael when cooked), which may be prepared in a number of ways. The more affluent household may eat a pilau, a dish of Persian origin, rice cooked with spices and meat; otherwise rice cooked with coconut milk may be served with a sauce, meat or fish (when available) and green vegetables or legumes. However, given the (ever-increasing) price of rice, few families can afford to eat rice on a daily basis. More common, particularly in rural areas, are local crops such as banana (ndrovî), cassava (mhogo) and ntsambo (known in English as false sago). Although the first two of these crops (rarely the last) may be purchased in the market, this is rare: they are subsistence crops and most Comorians will have access at least to a small plot of land where they will grow cassava and, space permitting, banana. As one aid worker put it, a field of cassava is like a “compte épargne sur livret”, a government-guaranteed passbook savings account. All three crops are generally prepared in a coconut sauce, and while banana alone is the ideal, the ubiquitous cassava is often used to stretch a small quantity of banana a little further; they are, ideally, cooked with fish or, more rarely, meat. Ntsambo—more of which later—is never mixed with cassava, and is only cooked with fish, never with meat.

Cooking, in the domestic non-ritual context, is exclusively the preserve of women and the džiho, hearth, generally located outside and behind the house, and covered with a roof to protect from the rain, is where the women of the family gather. Men are not explicitly excluded, but rarely will they linger in what is a female space. Women cook, and talk as they do so; girls learn how to cook and listen; younger children—boys and girls—linger, the former not yet of an age to enter the public space of the man’s world. The importance of the džiho as a social space is emphasised by the fact that contemporary houses, constructed western-style with an internal kitchen, will invariably also have a džiho outside. The western kitchen is generally ignored (for the purposes of cooking, at least) unless the occupant has spent a significant period of time in France. This fact reveals both the practical aspects—cooking on an open fire is still seen as preferable to using a stove—and the social aspects of the džiho: an outdoor džiho allows passers-by to stop and chat without needing to enter the house, particularly where entering the house may require passing through a room full of men.

The food, once prepared, is first served to the men, who will eat in one of the main rooms of the house; the women and children will eat later, once the men have had their fill, and usually elsewhere, particularly if the men have eaten in the reception room and remain there talking.

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2 Although the characteristic hospitality of the Arab world is pre-Islamic, both the Koran (eg, sura 107, Al-Maa’ûn) and many hadith reinforce the obligation of a Muslim to extend hospitality to, and particularly to share food with, guests and strangers.

3 Local rice production is negligible as a proportion of national requirements (about 5%) and the quasi-totality of local needs are met by imports from Asia (Basmati from Pakistan and “popular” rice from Thailand). Maize (corn), once widely eaten, has low social status, although there have been attempts to encourage a return to maize in an effort to reduce dependency on imported rice. It is, however, commonly sold roasted at stalls in the street and eaten as a snack. Other staples include yams (nana), sweet potatoes (shayazi), taro (jimbî) and various legumes and greens (the latter including mutaba, cassava leaves).
In both cases, collective eating reinforces a sense of belonging: the men of the family—father, brothers, husband, guests—eat around a common dish as equals; the head of the household may begin eating; equally, he may invite a guest to take the first mouthful. Within gender groups quotidian eating is a egalitarian practice; it does, however, reinforce family divisions along gender lines. There is nothing particularly unusual about daily Comorian food preparation or eating practices: the separate spheres of activity, the eating arrangements; even much of the food itself is unremarkable. In a ritual context however, cooking and eating practices are radically different.

Aada and food

If Islam obliges Comorians to share food in a daily context, custom regulates sharing in a ritual context. Life-cycle rituals subsumed within the term aada na mila ("custom and usage") impose a wide variety of obligations upon individuals, both men and women, linked to progression through an age system; the most ostentation and socially significant ritual in this cycle is the customary marriage. This lavish sequence of ritual events, much commented upon, involves repeated episodes of gift-giving, both responding to and creating debts between individuals and between groups within a specific social space, the village. Gifts and cash payments pass between bride’s family and groom’s family, between members of age cohorts, between “spectators” and “participants”, between men and women, indeed, between almost any social pair that might exist.

The salient feature of the aada marriage, however, is the obligation to feed the village. The determining principle of social organisation within the village is the age-system, within which the men of the village are organised into age grades. The age grades themselves are grouped into two distinct hierarchies: that of the wanamdj (sing. manamdj, the young men, literally, “children of the town”) and that of the wandruaudzima (sing. mndruaudzima, the elders, literally “whole men”). Each of the two hierarchies may include anything from two to half a dozen age grades; passage from the wanamdj group to the wandruaudzima group occurs on the occasion of the aada.

The entire sequence of aada events revolves around the preparation and consumption of food. The first events in an aada are the djeleyo, of which there are two: at the first the bride’s family distributes foodstuffs (particularly rice and meat) to the various members of the quarter in order that meals be prepared to be eaten by the village during the subsequent fortnight. Similarly, at the groom’s house, the mxaliko (maele ya djaliko, “rice of the djaliko”) is announced. This meal, literally an invitation to the djaliko dance, is the last meal that a man will prepare for his coevals—the wanamdj of the village—before becoming a mndruaudzima. The announcement of this meal—the number of makombe (sing. kombe), dishes of rice—is

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4 As noted, food, in the domestic context is prepared by women; in a public context women may also prepare food: if roasted maize in the market is generally prepared by men, mishakiki, small skewers of meat roasted over hot coals and eaten by the roadside, may often be prepared by women.

5 Although a marriage remains the central feature of the aada cycle, the emphasis is on a social confirmation of marriage. Indeed, the couple involved will generally have been legally married for some time prior to enacting their aada marriage—in some cases for as long as 25 years (with the attendant adult children that this implies). Note also that the aada itself will usually be spread over two separate years. The description of the aada here is of necessity cursory: see Walker, forthcoming, for full analysis.

6 The term “village” should be taken to refer to a socio-spatial unit that is usually coextensive with an entire village, but may correspond to a quarter of a village or (very rarely) two physically discrete but socially unified villages.

7 This is a highly simplified sketch of the system; see Walker (forthcoming) for details.
eagerly awaited by the young men of the town and the announced figure is greeted with joy or disappointment according to whether it meets expectations.

The *mwali ko* is the final and most important of a series of meals\(^8\) that the groom has presented to his coevals during his life as a *wanamdji*. It is an essential element in the consolidation of links between members of the village, for although it is paid for by the groom, it is cooked by the bride’s family and eaten by the *wanamdji* of the village in the bride’s family’s houses. It therefore reinforces and asserts belonging as well as being conditional upon the village-endogamous character of the marriage: the *wanamdji* who are to eat the meal must be both coevals of the groom and members of the bride’s village. There are a number of technical reasons for this, not least of which being that it is both the right and the duty of all concerned to both prepared and eat the meals provided in the village. A meal prepared by the bride, and eaten by the groom’s coevals will either respond to or pave the way for a similar meal prepared by women of the groom’s family and eaten by men of the bride’s family, either at some point in the past or at some indeterminate time in the future. Clearly, therefore, bride and groom must be of the same village in order for reciprocal obligations to be met. In case where the two are not of the same village (these days not uncommon in the urban areas of the west coast of the island), then two meals must be prepared (and, often, transported at high speed along the island’s narrow roads).\(^9\)

Attendance at the *mwali ko* is by right. All *wanamdji* who have entered the age system are entitled to eat at all ritual meals that involve either specifically their own grade or all grades collectively. On the day of the *mwali ko* itself they gather in the public square after the noon prayer and are, group by group, led away to their meal. If the town is small, the meal modest, or the location spacious then all may eat in the same place; otherwise small groups will eat in different houses across the village. They will be seated on mats on the floor, generally eight or so to a mat. Seating is carefully managed. Each group is constituted with respect for the status of individuals: their age (biological as much as social, particularly where the two conflict and a man is older than he should be), their family status (with particular attention to the placing of the father or mother’s brother, if present) and their clan membership. If two men of the same family and of significantly differing status are likely to be present, they will not be seated together. There will therefore be groups of different status, the more senior men, and younger men of high status will be grouped together; junior men and those of lesser clans will also be grouped together. However, the groups themselves will also be representative of the *wanamdji* as a whole: there will be a man (usually only one) of the senior age grade at each mat, and, where possible, at least one member of each of the other grades. Social status is thus confirmed and reinforced in the seating arrangements: groups are both hierarchically constituted and structurally homologous.

When all are present and seated the *kombe*, a large platter some 60 centimetres in diameter, piled high with rice (and, usually, crowned with an omelette) is brought in. Other dishes also arrive in separate bowls: meat known as *ntibe*, *ntsuzi* (pigeon peas), *mataba* (cassava leaves) and *kachumbari*, a garnish of chopped tomatoes and chilli, are inevitable; fish, chicken, salad, even potatoes may be added according to the means of the family. A self-appointed server, one of the senior *wanamdji*, will ladle the various foodstuffs onto the mound of rice, pressing the meat well in so that it is partially hidden in the rice and will not fall, distributing the various other

\(^8\) Many now replaced by cash payments.

\(^9\) In cases involving different quarters of the same town, a historical relationship (for example, between former free and slave quarters) may lead a complete refusal on the part of one group to eat a meal in the other quarter.
garnishes around the mound so that everyone has an equal quantity. Occasionally one of the better pieces of meat will be placed in front of a mnamdi who has a special claim or whom the group wishes to mark out: this is often someone who is also in mid-aada.

Food is eaten with the right hand; food that falls off the kombe is not, in theory, supposed to be replaced, but exception is generally made for a choice morsel of meat. When the savoury part of the meal has been consumed curdled milk and honey (or cane syrup) are added to the rest of the rice; finally a sweet banana may be offered as dessert. The meal will generally be closed by a brief prayer of thanks. When the plates are removed the server wipes the rim of the kombe with his finger, thus ensuring that the groom finds a welcome in his new family; and, without further ado, the assembly rises and leaves the room, usually receiving a cigarette (and a light) on the way out.

The wanamdi will eat other meals during the week, but not as a single group; instead they will be divided and eat with others of their own grade. The wamdraudzima will also be fed, again, in smaller groups, over the week between the bride and groom's entry into the nuptial house, during which time and within which the latter are secluded. If the mwaliko is intended to affirm village-wide solidarity, the latter meals will affirm solidarity on a more restricted basis.

Individuals (all of whom will, again by right, eat), will be grouped according to age grade and clan. The food will be similar to the above and the sheer quantity of food—several meals a day for two weeks—implies constant activity in the cooking areas, particularly on the part of women, who prepare all but the meat, but also the men, who slaughter and cook the animals.

The majority of these meals are prepared by the women of the bride's family's residential quarter. The cooking will generally take place in a specially selected area outside the family's principal residence and the scene is highly animated. Giant pots of rice and vegetables simmer on fires fuelled by coconut husks and wood. The women do what they can to raise money, either for themselves (as a reward for their work) or for the purchase of firewood and other such essentials. Impromptu dances or songs may be rewarded with small payments; fines are often incurred for minor (and sometimes imaginary) infractions, such as stepping on someone's toe, or walking through a cooking area without permission.

The meat is not cooked by the women; beef and goat meat for ritual meals, known as nitibe, is cooked by men in a location physically removed from the women's cooking area and, often, in public view rather than being to the side of or behind a house. The meat itself is slaughtered close by, according to Islamic practice: the meat cannot be pre-slaughtered, even if halal. Indeed, both the goats and, particularly, the cow should be of Comorian origin and not imported, although given the high costs of the highly prized local cattle, those lacking the means may purchase cattle imported live from Madagascar. Nitibe is prepared by cooking the meat in salted water until the meat is soft and the water has evaporated. There is evident symbolism in the meat: not only is it the only foodstuff to be cooked by men (and the cooking is overseen if not actually carried out by the senior man of the clan), but the name nitibe recalls the sultan nitibe, supreme ruler of the island in the pre-colonial period, even if the office was largely honorific. This meat, clearly, is the sultan of meats.\footnote{The symbolism inherent in meat is equally visible in the distribution of meat during the aada, meat that is destined to be eaten privately rather than publicly. The best cuts are presented to the highest clans in the village, the skin and entrails given out freely although not necessarily without meaning: at one aada a friend of mine, late in marrying, was given the vagina of the slaughtered cow, which he carried off rather bashfully. Note that the cooking of chicken, where served, is not the preserve of men. Note also that nitibe is frequently eaten in the diaspora, in France and in Zanzibar, and in non-ritual contexts. The de-ritualisation of ritual foods is common among Comorians outside the island and presents a culinary parallel to the de-}
The importance of this obligation to feed the village is reflected in the ambiguities of the aada. Those who refuse to participate fully in the aada, either by virtue of their religious convictions or in rebellious deference to Western practice, are constrained to provide a ritual meal or, failing that, a payment with which a meal will be prepared on his behalf. Similarly, those who, either collectively or individually, decide (within the confines of social praxis as defined by the aada) that meals are superfluous are nevertheless required to make cash payments instead, payments which are accepted in lieu of (and, if required, to purchase) food.\(^{11}\) The obligations are quite therefore explicit.

Most explicitly, the reciprocal obligations of the aada do not allow for ritual commensality to occur outside the island. Comorian emigrants have repeatedly attempted (in Zanzibar, in France, elsewhere) to fulfil their aada obligations by preparing meals for the diaspora, but the validity of such rituals is rejected in Ngazidja. The aada, the ritual passage from young man to elder with the concomitant right to receive at subsequent aada events, must be spatially grounded, and no exceptions are permitted.

\section*{Eating in the diaspora}

Collective eating among Comorians in the diaspora therefore lacks that very specific ritual significance that it has in Ngazidja. Instead the collective consumption of food occurs at non-ritual events; in life-cycle contexts that do not call for the discharge of aada obligations; or in life-cycle events that can be enacted on the understanding that they will have to be repeated in order to meet ritual commensal obligation upon an eventual return to Ngazidja. Some marriage events in Zanzibar, deliberately modelled on the aada, are, by local standards, extremely costly\(^{12}\) but are nevertheless always rejected as aada by the home village in Ngazidja, precisely and explicitly because the village has not been fed: ritual obligations of commensal reciprocity have not been met, and thus the individual concerned clearly cannot be admitted to the rank of elder, with its concomitant right to eat at the aada of others.

The Comorian diaspora in France is the largest Comorian community outside the islands. Estimated at between 100,000 and 150,000,\(^{13}\) and resident in Marseille, Paris and, in lesser numbers, towns such as Dunkirk, Lyon and Bordeaux, approximately 95\% are from Ngazidja and thus both expect and are expected to follow their obligations in the aada. This is largely a reflection of the fact that most of the first generation currently intend to return and retire to the island and will require both the social and the economic benefits that the aada accords them. The cyclical nature of aada prestations implies that most will also undertake, or attempt to undertake, the aada marriages of their daughters, thus ensuring that they attain the highest possible status in the hierarchy of elders in Ngazidja.

As a result of the socio-spatial cohesion maintained by the aada, networks among the community in France are strongly orientated towards the village or region of origin. At least

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\(^{11}\) Many agree that the lengthy sequence of aada meals, often linked to obsolete marriage-related chores such as housebuilding, may safely be dispensed with. The social aspects of the exchanges, however, must be retained.

\(^{12}\) Leading some Zanzibaris to counsel their sons against marrying a Comorian, for fear of financial ruin.

\(^{13}\) The large number of illegal immigrants makes it difficult to enumerate the population with any precision. Estimates of numbers of emigrants from villages on the island suggest that the figure is unlikely to be much below 100,000.
80 of the 192 Comorian associations in France listed by the Comorian website Mwezinet\textsuperscript{14} are obviously regional, village or quarter-based organisations. Some villages have separate associations for men, for women and for the young; some villages even have separate associations in different towns in France.

These associations are instrumental in shaping links between the homeland and the diaspora in France, channelling funds destined for home village development purposes as well as linking Ngazidja with the wider French community. However, they are equally important as a focal point for social networking and cultural activities among the Comorian community in France, and although the aada itself cannot be replicated in France, quasi-aada events serve to reinforce a sense of cohesion and belonging among the older members and inculcate Comorian values in the younger ones. As a result there are regular Comorian cultural evenings, indeed, on almost a weekly basis, with an affluence of events on occasions such as Id al Fitr, Comorian independence day, the Gregorian New Year, and so on; and these events, almost without exception, will include a meal.

The menus are Comorian within the limits imposed by French grocers: Sambussa (samosas), salads (often qualified as “exotic”), pilawu, coconut chicken (a perennial favourite, since both coconut cream and chicken are easily procured in France), coconut rice, roasted cassava, fried bananas, cassava leaves (mataba) followed by Comorian cakes (a rice cake called mkatre wa sinia is popular), coffee or spiced tea all appear on the menus. These meals reinforce a sense of belonging among those who attend, even if, for several reasons, they—the foods, the meals, the people—are not entirely Comorian in character.

First, and most obviously, the foods are not the humble quotidian dishes of the homeland. Pilawu and coconut chicken are either middle class meals or meals for occasions in Ngazidja; furthermore, to the outsider they are not particularly Comorian: pilawu is found across the region, and coconut chicken can be found wherever the conjunction of coconuts and chickens occurs. Sambussa and cakes are snacks, not daily fare, usually prepared in advance; and neither the bananas nor the cassava are cooked as main courses, served rather as snacks or side dishes, fried, roasted or even (in deference to Western influences) chipped (in both senses of the term). The ndrovi na nazi, coconut bananas, basic meal of the island, is notably absent. Only the mataba, cassava leaves and fish boiled in coconut milk, is both exotic and hot. Much of the food shared is therefore peripherally Comorian rather than fundamentally Comorian. This allows for ethnically French partners and guests to participate—through commensality they are, of course, drawn into a Comorian social world—as well as being a symbolic recognition of the fact that the context is, after all, France and not Ngazidja. Nevertheless, the food is very different from French food, which Comorians rarely eat, at home or elsewhere: mitigated Comorian-ness.

Secondly, the meals are usually eaten with cutlery and not with the hands. Eating with one’s fingers is symbolic of a particularly Comorian practice and, in France, represents either rituality or “uncivilised” behaviour (or both) depending on one’s perspective. Civilised (read Westernised) Comorians eat with forks and spoons, like the French among whom they live. Thirdly, the meals are often mixed: unless the meal is symbolically cognate with a ritual (aada) event, men and women will eat together (and, if the occasion requires, children, too). Once again, this is a reflection of French family values: family commensality emphasises a

\textsuperscript{14} http://www.comores-online.com/mwezinet/associations/liste.htm, as of 17/11/2008. These non-profit associations are regulated by the French “Loi de 1901”.  

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sentiment of being French (being in France) even as Comorian-ness is simultaneously reinforced.

In France difference is radically present across a range of social contexts and as a result food need not be highly Comorianised in order to represent Comorian identity. Less “authentic” Comorian foods additionally have the advantage of being palatable to the French, thus allowing French friends and family to participate: edible (sic) food, cutlery, mix-gender contexts all allow for displays of Comorian identity in a wider social context where Comorian social practice incorporates rather than distinguishes, since distinction is already present. At ritual and other special events, French food therefore serves to incorporate; it is in the daily practice that Comorian-ness is emphasised.

It is notable also that in France foods may be easily purchased locally at ethnic grocery stores: there is little, if anything on the menus above that is not available in France and almost without exception the various ingredients are available to and used by other cultural groups. It is only the specific recipes that accord these foods their Comorian character; and, of course, to the untrained palate, there is little to distinguish a Comorian sambussa from an Indian samosa, Comorian cassava leaves from Congolese cassava leaves, Comorian rice cakes from Malagasy rice cakes. What is absent here is the direct link with the homeland: this is food at a remove.

In Zanzibar, the link is more evident; but at the same time the local foods are more familiar and the need for a creation of difference that much more real. Comorians belong in Zanzibar in a way that they do not in France: they are one of several constituent groups of a cosmopolitan Zanzibari population and have been present on the island for two centuries. They, like the Goans, Omanis, Hadramis and Gujeratis, have developed and maintain a distinct yet Zanzibari identity even into the post-revolutionary period. However, Comorian culture and Swahili culture have much in common, including the cuisine, despite the Zanzibari lament that everything Comorians eat is cooked in coconut milk: this is, perhaps, the point.

Whereas commensality in France draws the French into a Comorian world (that nevertheless makes concessions to being French), eating practices in Zanzibar reinforce Comorian belonging as Zanzibarics. Comorians eat the same food, and often eat it in the same contexts, as Zanzibarics in a Zanzibari way. Comorians are, in daily practice, Zanzibari; in contrast to the French context, Zanzibari belonging is emphasised in daily practice and it in exceptional (including ritual) contexts that Comorians identities are promoted.

Eating sambussa or pilau (or even ndrovi na nazi) in Zanzibari is not specifically indicative of Comorian identity, for other Zanzibarics cook sambussa and pilau, and some of them do it much better than Comorians do. In order to be different, to affirm a sense of identity, the food consumed must itself be radically different, hence the “all things coconut” approach to Comorian cuisine. Since coconut is readily available in Zanzibar, it is a simple enough to use it on a daily basis. To truly create a difference, however, Comorians aspire to consume foods that are not readily available locally and must therefore be imported. This denies the possibility of other members of the Zanzibari community eating the same thing while at the same time reaffirming what is for some an increasingly tenuous link with home.

In Zanzibar, unlike France, this direct link with home has been attenuated: both the temporal depth to the community in Zanzibar and the rupture caused by the Zanzibari revolution have
seen the weakening of contacts and the development of an identity that is distinctly Zanzibari Comorian. Many Comorians in Zanzibar have never visited the island; some aspire to doing so, others say that they would rather not.15 Regardless, there are a number of Comorians in Zanzibar who do indeed maintain the links, travelling to and fro, to aada, to funerals and on family visits; who themselves undertake their aada, and who serve as conduits for the transmission of Comorian social practice and cultural values to the community in Zanzibar. Many return with food, food that resuscitates memories.

Almost without exception, the Comorians I have talked to in Zanzibar about food have recollections of Comorian foods brought back from the island and consumed in their childhood and youth. The foods Abdulrazak wanted are on the list, particularly (since travel was inevitably part of the process of returning from Ngazidja) ladu, as well as nyama ya bukini (dried spiced meat), also good for travelling. But one food stands out as being particularly representative of Ngazidja: tapu. Tapu, or ntsambu as it is called in Ngazidja, is unique in that it cannot be anything but Comorian, both in its essence and its origins. Ladu, ndrovi na nazi, putu, shihondo, sambussa, mkatata wa sinia, all these foods and more can and (to varying degrees) are prepared outside the island; only ntsambu cannot.

**Ntsambu**

*Cycas thouarsii* is a palm-like plant that produces large, round seeds that are toxic but edible. It is an unusual plant from a botanical point of view. It is one of the cycads, gymnosperms, non-flowering plants superficially similar to palms but taxonomically quite different. Not inappropriately, *Cycas thouarsii* appears to be a migrant itself, for although representatives of the eleven genera of cycads are found across the tropical and sub-tropical world, including southern and central Africa, all other members of the *Cycas* genus (and only members of the *Cycas* genus) are found in the Asia-Pacific region: only *Cycas thouarsii* is found in Africa, in Madagascar and scattered in isolated locations on the east African littoral as well as in the Comoros. It appears to have arrived there with immigrants from Indonesia in centuries past, a food, perhaps, that they were not prepared to forego, although the fact that *Cycas thouarsii* is both the most ancient of cycads and not found in Asia sits uneasily with this hypothesis.

Cycads are rarely eaten in Africa, times of famine excepted, although there are reports of a species of *Encephalartos* being used to prepare bread among the Khoisan in the western Cape. In the Asia-Pacific area, however, both the leaf and the seed of cycads are eaten widely, from India and Japan to Australia and Melanesia. In Aboriginal Australia cycad seeds are eaten in ritual contexts; in Japan they were apparently so highly valued that their export was prohibited; while in Guam consumption of cycads has been suggested as a cause of a high local incidence of neurological disorders ("Guam disease").

Preparation is a long process; a local recipe run as follows:

> Collect the fruit when they ripen. Break the shells with a stone and split the seeds in half. Dry them in the sun for two days.

15 For a number of reasons: the chronic economic crisis in Comoros (lack of roads, fuel, electricity, water) and high prices hardly entices the tourist; but many are also reluctant to engage with the obligations that a return to the homeland will incur. In particular, returned family from Zanzibar are expected to visit all relevant family members, in a (contested) sequence that respects the family hierarchy, and during which they will constantly be exhorted to participate in the *aada*. 
Wrap the seeds in banana leaves, bury them and cover them with pieces of banana trunk. Leave them to ferment for five days. Dig them up, wash them and boil them in water for approximately two hours to remove the disagreeable odour.

Cut them into small pieces, put them in another pot with coconut milk and grilled fish, never with meat.

The fermentation process seems to be sufficient to remove the toxins; boiling the seeds for two hours, however, does not seem sufficient to remove the smell; either that, or it is an optional stage in the process.

In 1999, while staying with my French friends Françoise and her husband Roger in the Comorian capital Moroni, I returned from Washili with a large pot of *ntsambu* for them to taste—a typical local dish that, despite having been on the island for two years, I knew they had not yet tasted. I reheated the meal and brought it to the table. Françoise immediately left the room and steadfastly refused to return as long as the *ntsambu* was present; Roger chuckled bravely and picked up his spoon. Although he tasted the nuts, he eventually gave up after swallowing a few pieces of fish. “It sure does stink,” he said. Françoise could not be persuaded to taste it, and objected so strongly to the smell that the next evening, when I returned to house and started searching vainly in the fridge, she confessed she had given it to the maid and told her to take it home. The maid gleefully disappeared with enough food to feed her family. When I questioned her the next day, she expressed great enthusiasm for *ntsambu* but admitted that she did not, herself, know how to cook it.

On Ngazidja, *ntsambu* is a highly symbolic food, invoking precise regional identities that may be asserted or downplayed according to the context. The plant grows only in the northeastern part of the island and is specifically associated with the former kingdoms of Hamahame and, particularly, Washili; indeed, myth recounts how a eighteenth century king of Washili, Trambwe ben Habadi, precociously spoke while still in the womb, saying that, once born, he would declare war against the people of Hamahame, for they were continually stealing *ntsambu* plants from Washili.

Today the plant is eaten all over the island, and with some enthusiasm, although the people of Washili remain the acknowledged experts in preparing and cooking the seed as well as detaining a cultural authority over the food. I will not enter here into the regional specificities of Comorian identity, except to say that for various reasons Washili is often seen as the cultural heart of Ngazidja; it is very nearly the geographical centre of the island and its capital, Kwambani, lies on the only road that crosses the island from east to west. It was in Kwambani that meetings of the island’s leaders were held in pre-colonial times, and it was here that arguably Ngazidja’s finest and certainly its best known poet-king, Mbaye Trambwe (1735-1815), ruled.

Thus, as things Washili symbolise the quintessence of Comorian-ness, so *ntsambu* is also detached from its regionally specific identity and appropriated as a symbol of Comorian culinary identity. The pungent (and, admittedly, fetid) aroma is embraced by Comorians with much the same glee that the French reserve for a particularly malodorous cheese;\(^\text{16}\) it does, \[\text{Curious, in fact, that the French have such difficulty with *ntsambu*, given that the smell has been likened to that of a particularly ripe Camembert.}\]
however, dissuade the Other from eating this uniquely Comorian food, both in Ngazidja and beyond. Typically, it simultaneously affirms belonging and excludes those who do not belong.

And therein lies the problem, for Zanzibari Comorians are equally uncomfortable with the smell of ntsambu. Despite the fact that the plant grows in East Africa, it is not eaten there—the stands of the plant on the mainland, isolated and scattered along the coast from Mozambique to Kenya, are undoubtedly dispersed populations from the Comoros and Madagascar. Some Comorians are familiar with the plant as a food plant; but while many of those who grew up in Ngazidja recall it from their childhood, most Zanzibari Comorians express no desire to eat fresh ntsambu; indeed, on the contrary, most specifically state that they do not like it and would rather not eat it, were it offered to them. They will, however, eat cakes made out of unga wa tapu, ntsambu flour, which is odourless. This, too, therefore, is mitigated Comorian-ness. This is the limit of the Comorian Zanzibari’s identity with Comorians from Ngazidja. Informants have explicitly told me that the smell is important—to Comorians (a category from which, in this particular context, they exclude themselves), not to others.

Ntsambu flour is made in a fairly straightforward process that involves drying the boiled seeds and then grinding them. The odourless flour (if the seeds have been properly boiled) can then be used to make ubu, a type of porridge or gruel, or baked into cakes. The point of Ntsambu flour is that it comes directly from Ngazidja. It cannot be purchased in Zanzibar (except, occasionally, from someone who has just returned from Ngazidja with a quantity surplus to requirements), it must be obtained through a direct link with the island. It is one of the most explicit and direct markers of Comorian identity—certainly the most direct edible marker—and yet, the essential characteristic, the most Comorian characteristic, of ntsambu is missing: the odour.

One final (although possibly not surprising) attempt to re-Comorianise the imported ntsambu was described to me by a women who was active within the community and confident in her identity: odourless ntsambu. Imported ntsambu flour is mixed into a dough similar to that used for making chapatis and rolled into little round balls about the size of ntsambu seeds. It is then boiled in water, strained and cut in half. The end product is, if it is well-made, almost identical to ntsambu, but entirely odourless; it may now be used as ntsambu is, cooked with coconut milk and fish. At this point we should perhaps concede that it has been transformed into tapu (the Swahili for ntsambu) for, without its smell, it is no longer Comorian.

Food and identity

Among Comorians, eating fulfils a range of social tasks. Foods themselves are intimately linked with memory: Abdulrazak’s list, with which we started, clearly illustrated this. The ladu and shihondo of his desires were representative of specific periods of his life, voyages and conviviality respectively, the putu less so, but although Abdulrazak’s desire for putu was expressed more prosaically, it nevertheless held a hint of nostalgia.

More widely, however, the acts of commensality serve different purposes in different contexts. In France, food eaten on special occasions is aimed at establishing inter-group solidarity: Comorians are French; but so, too, may the French become Comorians. Eating with the

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17 They may be of recent origin; the plant is apparently of no cultural significance although other cycads have medicinal and ritual uses in eastern and southern Africa.

other, in a de-comorianised context, allows French participants to become Comorian: commensality attenuates the social and cultural differences and, in doing so, attempts to challenge the social hierarchy within which Comorians find themselves inscribed—with low status—in France. In private however, daily eating practice is highly Comorian. Boundaries are marked at the limits of the family commensal group, and within those boundaries the food is Comorians, the eating practices Comorian. Here hierarchies are not being challenged; rather, they are being reinforced, specifically in the gender separation that operates in quotidian eating practices with the Comorian community.

In Zanzibar the opposite is true. In private contexts, the food eaten is usually Swahili Zanzibari in character. Comorians practice and eat as Zanzibaris; it is only in exceptional cases—special events including rituals, as well as moments when food from Ngazidja is available—that Comorian-ness is emphasised. However, it is emphasised in radically different ways. Foods that Comorians are prepared to share are offered to others in ritual contexts, when social structures are not so much being challenged as being reaffirmed since Comorians hold relatively high status in Zanzibar. Comorian identity need only be asserted in the private sphere, where rights to belonging are affirmed and group membership consolidated. In such contexts Comorians eat foods that they do not wish to share, or that Zanzibar do not wish to eat, even though they may choose to taste them. Since eating practice in Zanzibar is almost identical to eating practice in Ngazidja, only the foods themselves can mark out the difference. And so they do. Comorian cakes, such as mkate wa simia and gudugudu, foods such as luwadu and ntsambu, ntihe and patu, are all denied to Zanzibaris. Sometimes this denial is a result of the knowledge being held (and not shared) by Comorians: only the doyenne of the Comorian community in Zanzibar—a woman who regularly travels to Ngazidja and is firmly committed to the aada—really knows how to make gudugudu, and, lest Zanzibaris be tempted to try to do likewise, she once confided to me, “it can’t really be made properly in Zanzibar since you can’t get the right sort of rice”. Culinary knowledge is power: the power to confer Comorian-ness. Authenticity is the key to culinary identity. Real food comes from home. There is an immediate link that indicates that whoever obtains the food is directly linked to Ngazidja, she has the requisite networks to obtain fresh food immediately and without delay: she is sufficiently Comorian to be the person to whom fresh food is brought or sent. Eating ntsambu therefore both relies on and symbolises a physical link with the homeland. Furthermore, the food must be prepared by someone with the correct knowledge to do so: it must be correctly prepared in order that the final dish be authentic, edible and, where required, recognisable as Comorian and as not Zanzibari, to Comorians and Zanzibaris alike.

Comorians in Zanzibar are not Comorians in France, since their identity is tied to their status in Zanzibar and as Zanzibaris. In France Comorians remain committed to the aada, and to their island, expressing a desire to return that Comorian Zanzibaris have long since renounced. Comorians in France will happily eat ntsambu, but are generally unable to do so, given the difficulties involved in obtaining it. This is, fortunately, unimportant, since Comorians in France do not need to eat ntsambu. Comorian Zanzibaris, however, will not only eat ntsambu, but need to eat ntsambu as part of the process of identity construction; but they will only eat deodorised ntsambu flour or, rarely, reconstituted deodorised ntsambu seeds. Is it so surprising that Comorian Zanzibaris (unlike Comorians in France) do not like the foul-

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19 cf Appadurai, 1981.
20 A cake made out of sugar, rice flour and spices and typically served at marriages in Ngazidja.
21 see Grieshop (2006).
smelling *ntsambu*? Perhaps not, since they are, by their own admission, not really Comorian. Only a small handful maintain the social investment in Ngazidja that is represented by a participation in the *aada*. The majority call upon Comorian cultural markers—including food—as markers not of their Comorian-ness, but of their Zanzibari Comorian identity: they eat Comorian food not to express identity with Comorians, but to express difference from Zanzibaris.

In France, in a highly differentiated context, food is homogenising: Comorian food, authentic but acceptable to the French palate, is an incorporating project, allowing Comorians to claim belonging, but through a specifically Comorian process of incorporation of the other. In Zanzibar, on the other hand, in a relatively undifferentiated context, food differentiates: most Zanzibaris neither like nor want Comorian food, much of it imported directly from Ngazidja. However, the risk here is that Comorian Zanzibaris won’t like the food either, hence the avoidance of “real” *ntsambu*: to serve Comorian food that Comorians do no like would be to undermine the entire project of Comorian identity construction in Zanzibar.

There remains one final question: why didn’t Abdulrazak ask me for *ntsambu*—flour, if not the real thing—when I went to Ngazidja? His list of foods were quintessentially comorian and yet he didn’t want the one food that, above all other, epitomises the Comorian in Zanzibar. The answer is twofold. Firstly, his wife is not Comorian and thus would have been unable to correctly prepare *ntsambu* (or any other food that required cooking); and secondly—since the question must inevitably arise: has Abdulrazak no sister?—Abdulrazak is not from Ngazidja but is one of a small handful of Comorian Zanzibaris from the neighbouring island of Ndzwani. *Ladu, shihondo* and *putu* are all Comorian, here in the widest sense as being from all the islands; *ntsambu*, as we have seen is uniquely representative of Ngazidja. Abdulrazak was simply, as he himself observes, not Comorian.