

March 2008 Baby Naming Ceremony

March 2008

Hi everyone,

Before I begin – some people have asked if it's okay to forward my emails to others and the answer is a resounding “yes”. The objective of my emails is to let people know what I'm doing in Zanzibar and just what it is like to live in a third world country that is predominantly Muslim. If you know of anyone who would like to be added to my email list please let me know. I also understand that I write a lot – I know that I often don't have time to read long emails – so please just enjoy the photos. And let me know if you would like to be deleted from the list – I know that it can be difficult to be overwhelmed with emails.

I have lived in Zanzibar for more than three years and believe that this is the true “melting pot” of the world. There are Christians, Hindus, and many different sects of Islam practicing their faiths side by side, living and working together. It is certainly not perfect but there is much that can be learned from all of the people who are a part of the interwoven fabric of this society. I was going to try to write a four sentence summary about the different sects of Islam but gave up – I am not an expert or an academic and there are many others who know much more than I do. In the end I can only tell you about my experience - I had the honor of being invited to a baby naming ceremony for my friend Kulsum and her third child.

Kulsum and her family are Bohra's which is a sect of the Shiites. What I do know is that at least from what I can see, the Shiites and the Sunnis here in Zanzibar respect each other. The Bohra's are, for the most part, originally from Yemen, Pakistan and India and the leader of their community is His Holiness, Dr Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin. The Bohras believe that they have a spiritual leader who is on this Earth much in the same way that the Ismaelis have the Aga Khan as their leader and the Catholics have the Pope as their leader.

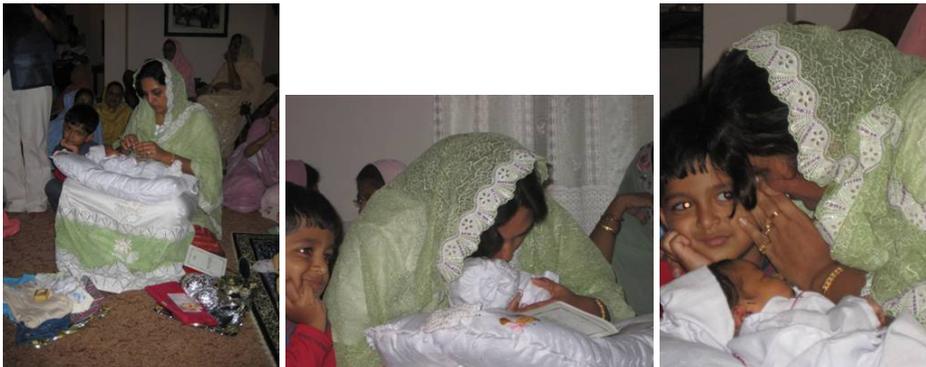


Javed and Kulsum are a lovely couple and very busy as they run a number of businesses and now have three sons. Javed is the fabulous photographer with the famous Zanzibar calendars and books – he also runs ZG Design, Zanzibar Tours, Zanzibar Book Shop and Swahili Coast magazine. Kulsum runs Zanzibar Gallery, one of the most unique tourist shops in Stonetown. I go into town at least twice a week and stop at Kulsum's shop to say hello. She has a smile for everyone and always takes time out to ask how things are with me and tells me a bit about what is going on with her. I love the rhythm of life here – some days we will chat for 5 minutes and other days we will sit and talk for an hour – as people say “You can never walk in a straight line through town”. What is a 10 minute walk from my house to the other end of town can often take more than 3 hours. Isn't the baby beautiful? And so content - he is dressed in a very special saya

kurta (pants and a long shirt) and a topi (the head piece). On the right is a photo of Kulsum, her father in law (who I call BaBa) and her son on his back.

There are always questions about Muslim women and whether or not they have control over their earnings. I can tell you that the women that I know do have control over their earnings but understanding the context of family and elders is what may be a bit complicated. As a grown woman in America I felt it was important for me to be financially independent of my family and my husband – that is not entirely the case here or at least that is not how it is articulated. Here the women have access to their earnings but the money is not separate – the only way that I think I can explain it is that the money goes into the “family pot” and then it is distributed as each person needs it. It’s not that the women or anyone else has to ask permission for money but it is important that each member of the family is respected in regards to money. I will tell you that I have observed over the last year or so as I have been getting to know Kulsum and her family that they are happy and work very well together – they are good partners. I told this to Javed and he smiled and said “Yes as long as I stay out of Kulsum’s shop and she stays out of my office”. Spoken like a true husband!!! How wonderful that they have worked out ways to be together as a family and as partners in a family business. When Kulsum is away or home with her children, Javed’s father or mother come in and run the shop. And there are often friends and family who come to visit from other parts of the world who also help out.

Now – His Holiness is quite old and based in Mumbai but he does travel. He visited Zanzibar in August 2007 and stayed in Javed and Kulsum’s newly built home (which is absolutely gorgeous). It was a great honor for them to host him and Javed asked His Holiness if he could provide a name for his child, as Kulsum was three months pregnant at the time. The custom is that the sister of the father of the child names the baby but in the Bohra tradition His Holiness will often suggest a name to be used. His Holiness gave Javed an envelope with two pieces of paper on which he had written the names of the children and told him not to open it until the baby naming ceremony. That ceremony is held six days after the baby is born. Please realize that I am not an expert and I hope that if you do read this and have questions that you will try to find the answers on the internet or from someone who may know more than I do.



Okay – now this was a great honor for me to be invited to this ceremony. I love traditions, learning about other cultures and I love becoming a part of the Zanzibar community, especially the women that I am getting to know. Hasiba Abbas is the sister of Javed and she is from Karachi Pakistan. I had met her daughter Sara last year when Sara spent the summer here and it was wonderful to be able to get to know Sara’s mom. It is not easy for them living in Karachi with so much political turmoil but they have been safe and as both Hasiba and Sara have said “It’s amazing how quickly we adapt to whatever our living situation is”. So on the left is Hasiba holding the baby in the middle of the room surrounded by Kulsum’s friends. Next to her is Kumail, Kulsum’s eldest son and on the floor are two trays, one is a tray of baby clothes which Hasiba told me was her gift to the baby. On the other tray are a number of very interesting items –

- Koran
- 2 coconuts
- Stick of pomegranate
- Saffron for ink
- Jaggery
- Sand from Imam Husain's tomb

Hasiba used a black lipstick and marked the baby on the front of each ear – she was writing an A for Alif and an N for Nabi which is Allah and this was to keep the evil spirits away. She took out the name that His Holiness had written on paper, leaned down and told the baby his name and then recited sayings from the Koran. I found it incredibly moving that I was a part of this ceremony – that we were all witnesses to the very first time that Huzaifa was told his name. It felt so special to know that there is a bond between Huzaifa and Hasiba that will always be there. How magnificent that a child should be part of that process and that in this way he is welcomed into the community. It was touching that Hasiba next turned to Huzaifa's older brother Kumail and whispered the name in his ear. She then went over to Kulsum and told her the name and Kulsum told everyone else. I don't quite understand the significance of everything that was on the tray but the coconuts are used at most ceremonies to hold things, the pomegranate stick and saffron ink are symbolic and are set on the right side of the baby the first night he sleeps after the baby naming so that God can write his destiny. I'm not sure what the jaggery was for but I tasted it and it was sweet – I think it was to be the first thing that he tasted and the sand was important as it was from Imam Husain's tomb and was now a part of Huzaifa.



The baby was then introduced to everyone by being passed around – he was sleeping the entire time!!!! Every woman touched him and welcomed him as the newest member of their community. Now – let me try to explain a little about the Bohras and the women. The women are wearing the national dress and scarf called ridah – this is a uniform that the Bohras wear to distinguish their identity. As in almost all religions, suggestions are made about dress but some may be stricter than others. Bohra women do not always wear the ridah in Pakistan or India but it is compulsory in Africa – I am going to assume it is because they are such a minority here and it is a way for them to feel stronger as a group.

The Bohra's have a tradition of self-employment and the word Bohra is derived from the term "trader" in Gujarati. They have a strong belief that interest earned or paid is in disharmony with Islam. Many of my Muslim friends have been surprised that I charged 5% interest on the micro loans to the women in my entrepreneur project. It took me awhile to learn that many Muslims do not believe in taking advantage of people in need by charging them interest (this is how it was articulated to me). The Bohras are trying to live their lives according to the economic principles of Islam so they do not pay or receive interest, whether that be from a bank account, a loan, the stock market or insurance. The majority of them choose to be entrepreneurs rather than working for others. Now – I knew many of the women at the ceremony because I have met them at their places of business. As you all know I just love talking with people and as you walk along Gizenga street, which is one of the tourist streets here, you will see many of these women in their shops. They have a variety of businesses which are family owned and run. I identify with that because

my dad had a printing business and as a little girl I used to go to “work” after school, which usually meant that my dad had me sweep the floor a bit then gave me money for candy which I always enjoyed. But I loved growing up in the atmosphere of a small business and certainly know that it shaped my life.

I have been hesitant to write about Islam, Muslims in Zanzibar and my life among them because it's so very difficult to try to explain to foreigners. As I said Zanzibar is a true melting pot and I learn something new every day. I am very aware that I am an older American woman living here and I do ask a lot of questions. I try very hard not to be intrusive and to be as respectful as possible. I am not a researcher and I am not an academic – I am just a curious, perpetual student who loves to learn. In 1974 I traveled Cairo to Capetown for one year in a VW van and realized that, as an American, I had a lot to learn from Africans – that it wasn't just about what I could teach them. It had always been a dream of mine to come back to Africa to live, to learn, to work with small business development and I am doing that right now. Zanzibar is a very small island and the people have been gracious, kind and patient with me. They have opened their hearts and their homes to me, sharing themselves with me in ways that I treasure. I am grateful and most fortunate to be a part of this community and hope that I can contribute something positive to this society as so many others are now doing.

Enjoy the coming of spring. I have visited some of the kitchen gardens and took lots of photos and hope to write up an email soon about that – as usual it is all very exciting.

Kathryn