

To Tsimbande, with all My Heart

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If I was to rank my food cravings, bambara nuts (tsimbande) are unlikely to make my top five; but they fit a spot much like a favourite coat that one might own and is free to wear every day, the one you have at the corner of the closet and only bring it out for special occasions. It takes a long time away from Nairobi—and immediate family—before my longings for tsimbande start. It is as if it is the only thing that could fill in the distance of home for me. The nuts are orb-like rather than bean-shaped. Boiled or roasted, the nuts always have a crunch to them. They taste dry and almost sour, they are dark brown, black, or red, just like beans. But they are not beans.

Tsimbande are often consumed as a condiment mixed in other foods to improve the flavour. They are included in mahenjera, a common boiled maize and beans dish that may be fried with other condiments, or they are part of a snack made up of tsinjuku, tsinuni and tsindashe that is: roasted groundnuts, sesame seeds, and another type of bean whose English name I do not know. There is no collective word for this mix.

Tsimbande were never grown as a staple food crop in the way that arrowroot, millet, cassava, beans and maize are grown. Even in the field, they are planted on a supplementary plot, often adjacent where the main crop is grown. They are the extra something to have in the store. Tsimbande are stored and brought out for special occasions. In all the times I've had tsimbande mixed in dishes, their ratio is low in comparison to other ingredients.

In early 2009 my maternal grandmother shared instructions on how to grow tsimbande with her daughter-in-law, my aunt Florence. It was a conversation about when, where and how to plant and tend to tsimbande until harvest time. It was a list of signs to observe in the soil, on the leaves and in the weather pattern. Barely weeks after my aunt harvested and shared her first batch of tsimbande, in December of that year, my grandmother died.

My grandmother and I were not particularly close, and when she was alive I saw her on average once a year. There were years I didn't visit her at all. The night after her funeral, my cousins and I sat around a bonfire close to her grave. Because my grandfather had died over ten years prior, I was conscious of the fact that we were unlikely to gather together like this, and with as much regularity as we had when my grandparents were alive. Even if we did, it would never be the same set of people, sharing the same joy and grief, in that place where our grandparents had made home, where our parents had spent their childhood. Even though there was some relief in having completed a last rite, we were all worn out and heavy with grief. My uncle, her son, then approaching his sixties, remarked that for the first time in his life he was an orphan. It's a feeling we all shared in that moment.

Aunt Florence plants her tsimbande around the months of March, and after August when the maize has been harvested. She emphasizes that tsimbande shouldn't be planted in soil that's considered rich or fertile—they won't thrive there.

Most supermarkets in Nairobi where I live offer a wide array of local and imported grains for sale. These are packaged and displayed on shelves or unpacked and available for sale in smaller quantities, making it easier to sample unfamiliar foods. With this in mind I went searching for tsimbande in these supermarkets but found that none of the ones I visit stock these. Neither did the open air markets I visit frequently. As most of my Nairobi-based relatives do, I have always relied on cousins and aunts travelling from western Kenya to supply tsimbande. Or else, I wait until I travel and purchase tsimbande for myself.

After my grandmother's death I'd linger over photographs of moments shared with her. In one photograph, she's seated on a mat on the ground, captured laughing with her face hidden behind her palm. She's surrounded by her children and grandchildren, sorting grain. It was a sunny afternoon, and we'd shared stories around a huge kettle of tea and boiled maize. It was the end of a gathering, and most of us would leave for our respective homes, with these grains as part of our luggage, the day after that photograph was taken. It's an otherwise tedious task I only willingly volunteered for because of the company. In an older undated photograph, my grandmother sits outside her house with a lutelu, a round woven tray, on her lap. Her face is turned away from the camera and she's bent over, inspecting the grain on the tray. She's sorting it, removing unwanted particles.

Throughout my childhood, visits to grandparents included some parts of this ritual: collecting grains from the store, inspecting them, cleaning them, and roasting them on the open fire. When I am drawn by the scent, I hover over the open fire. I am often urged to wait until the roasted grains are cool enough before I can taste them. Once all these ingredients are roasted, my grandmother combines them all on a different lutelu. Proportion is important. Too little or too much of any one of these ingredients will not produce the pleasure of munching on these grains.

Living far away, we try to make up for the days, weeks and even years spent apart from each other. When it's time to leave, she will package this blend for her departing visitors. Something small, she will say, as her calloused hands place these parcels in each of her guests' cupped palms. It is fortification for the long journey. It is something to deliver to those who did not make this visit. It is to be enjoyed later, whenever. She will sound apologetic because it is such a small quantity. When I

am apart from her, when I am longing for her, the roasted grain scent will remind me of her warmth, her chuckles and her embrace.

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At weddings, there is often the ubiquitous figure of the grandmother or senior aunt. She is accompanied by her sisters: siblings, sisters-in-law and cousins. Should they have the means, they will be dressed in new identical or matching outfits for this event. This aunt will have a stuffed basket or conspicuous bulky bag. She might have gone to all ends to find one that matches her outfit and doesn't stand out. It will still be visible. This is not to be confused with her wedding gift(s).

When there are delays at the weddings and the bride keeps the well-wishers in a limbo, this is the person you want to sit next to. Sensing the mood, she will dip into her bag, get a table spoon, or serving spoon or calabash, or an old melamine dish she uses to scoop out fistfuls of what she carries to those within her reach. You might notice some movement as others drawn by the distinct aroma sneak to her side to get some of it. The murmuring decreases as people munch. The ceremony will go on for as long as it must. These goodies out of the aunt's bag stave off hunger pangs as guests anticipate more food at the wedding reception.

Other times, tsimbande might be shared as the bride and groom exit the ceremony. Maybe on their way to the scheduled photo shoot. That aunt might be frowned upon for ruining the bridal party's looks as she ululates while sprinkling her mix on the bridal party. People might remember that they thought she was sophisticated until this incident. Depending on the crowd, the snack is received as a nostalgic reminder of rural life—idealised, or backward. More often than not, it's the life that people dressed in their finest want to leave behind, at least for this day. It's a life one escapes, spends a lifetime longing for, or intends to escape to, eventually. For me this mix is of that rural palate. If there is an official catering budget for this ceremony, it is unlikely that this mix will be included in the budget lines.

Later, after the bride and groom return from the photo shoot, after the eating, when all are sated, when there has been dancing, this aunt might commandeer the caterer's plates and spoons, much to their annoyance, if she did not arrive with her own. She will instruct nieces and nephews to help her share out this mix so that it's eaten alongside pieces of cake from the many-tiered wedding cake. It's what these aunties and grandmothers have been doing, turning up for weddings and sharing this.

Aunt Florence tells me that tsimbande are never planted by people who have just had children or are trying to have children. I speculate that *mature* may be a stand in for the word menopause. Women who are past childbearing. Women. I wonder if this rule binds today's tsimbande farmers.

My father, in his 70s, had his first crop of tsimbande planted over a year ago. While searching for seeds, he'd found out that tsimbande are cultivated in Uganda. In fact, he said, a lot more than in Kenya. He travelled to Busia, Kenya's and Uganda's shared border, to get seeds for planting. Of all the things my father excels at, farming is not one of them.

'Tsimbande are planted after the harvest of maize in the months of August and September. The land is prepared by tilling, and then a shisili, a small hoe, is used to make holes for sowing the seeds. The seeds are dropped as the holes are made. The seeds take one week to germinate and weeding is done one month after planting. The second weeding is done with addition of soil around the plant to cover the roots completely. This allows the crop to bear many pods. The beans are harvested after about three months from the day of planting.'^[1]

My father admits that he didn't plan and time the planting correctly. He chose the wrong location. He used fertilizer where he shouldn't have. He'd anticipated the short rain season at the end of the year, the one he's known since childhood. The rains came late. The seeds sprouted and grew. He could see pods coming to the surface above the soil. But the rain fell heavy and relentless when the ground should have been drying. The crop didn't thrive in this rain, and in the ground that should have been dryer and warmer than it was. He did harvest some tsimbande, but not nearly as much as anticipated.

A neighbour says he made the mistake of hiring young women to plant tsimbande.

Aunt Florence explains to me that there are certain taboos about planting tsimbande: If someone with evil intentions walks on your field, among the growing plants, the crops will fail. During the second weeding you might notice that the tsimbande appear burnt, she says. There's a scientific explanation for that burnt appearance, but you never know. There are other taboos, but my aunt does not know them all. My friend's mother says there's nothing to worry about. She and her daughters have farmed tsimbande without experiencing any of the feared repercussions.

Maybe someone with evil intentions walked into my father's farm.

What goes unsaid in these conversations between my aunt and I, and between my father and I, perhaps because they know I've got no intention of farming, at least not in the near future, is what they'd warn me against, if I did. What goes unsaid is that I have these conversations with my father and with my aunts because I'm constructing memories of my dead mother. Filling her into spaces she never was. Bringing forward the conversations she might have had with me if she'd lived beyond her 30s. Willing my grandmother to live longer and teach me what her daughter couldn't. What goes unsaid is that I'm unmarried and fast approaching that age where no one will expect me to have children. They'd like me to have those.

When harvesting tsimbande the whole plant is uprooted. For the next planting season, farmers start again. Dig new holes, plant new seeds, and hope that these seeds flourish. I do not think my father is discouraged by this one-time crop failure. I know he will try again. I know that in the coming seasons my aunt will continue to grow tsimbande. I have a standing invitation to visit, learn something else from her. I imagine, we will eat tsimbande together, and it will be special.

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