

## Stonetown at Midnight

someone has spilled rosewater in the streets. it has mixed in with cobblestone, urine, discarded banana peels, crumpled foil and the belches of the open drain dirty water runs along the stones like a leaking vein, she lifts her dress to cross the street pulls the child she walks with, scolds them not to drag their feet, then enters the courtyard the crossway where the bajaji park, where people pass and may be tempted by the smell of hot chapati only 200 shillings the floor around is black from charred wood and coal the other women come with their babies too wipe beads of sweat off foreheads, serve hot food of a plate of old newspaper, maps of oil. the municipal council has a board, 'onyo: usishushe usipakie, abiria, biashara marufuku eneo hili' - utawala warning: do not park, do not sell, do not disembark, do not collect at midnight, their cloaked shadows climb into the back of the bajaji heavy after a day's work they pile into the bajaji's dark cavernous mouth wipe crust from their eyes huddle against each other clutch plastic picnic sacks with thermoses of hot spiced tea and brown paper bags smeared with black grease ready to sell - to sleep and wake again to endure whatever it is the next day has to offer them and they offer this menu: chapati - vitumbua - sambusa - spoonfuls of sugar - maji ya vuguvugu for rinsing.

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*The inspiration for this poem was a late-night observation of women making hot food to sell in central Stone Town, Zanzibar. Women often engage in 'informal' economic activities such as street hawking, selling food all while engaging in childcare and home maintenance alongside other activities. The poem aimed to highlight how transport is central to these activities as well as female solidarity when traveling in groups for safety and support.*

Credit: Alma Simba - aa noun