

# 02

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Aspects of hospitality:  
fragrant and healing plants

when there is nothing.

And an end when there is forever.

On this Wednesday morning, the Journey could not find

the nothingness

in this place called Tiwi,

because since the nothingness,

# 02

## Aspects of hospitality: fragrant and healing plants

**Abdalla Mwanyumba & Tima Dago**

### **1. Fragrances**

Fragrances are mixture of different organic compounds that emit a certain pleasant smell or odour which can be used in different purposes such as in body cosmetic, in beverages, in food essence or in indoor and outdoor home fumigation during special occasions or ceremonies. They are also used to express one's personality or mood. Different types of fragrance have been used in various community groups depending on the occasions or cultural event in a particular time.

The Digo are a sub-group of the Mijikenda larger ethnic group found near the Indian Ocean coast between Mombasa and Tanzania boarder in East Africa. They speak the Chidigo language and mostly are fishers, weavers and potters. The Digo are one of the larger ethnic groups who use fragrance, incense and perfumes in a wide array of cultural events such as weddings, funerals, initiation ceremonies, in night or day out with partners. Detailed illustrations and application of these perfumes or fragrances are described as follows.



### 1.1. Air fresheners and cosmetics

During wedding occasions various fragrances were used by the Digo to symbolise specific themes to the bride and groom. Several fragranced extracts from tree trunks, shrubs, fruits, leaves and flowers were used by Digo communities as cosmetic for body and hair care. The extracts could be blended with natural oils such as coconut, castor, simsim or macadamia oils.

#### *Asminis*

Asminis are small pretty blossoms which flourish in tropical and subtropical regions. It produces white or pale pinkish fragranced blooms. During wedding ceremonies, the pretty buds are laced together and worn like a necklace by the bride and groom when exchanging vows. Before the wedding night the Asmini flower buds are spread on bed to symbolise love, intimacy and romantic atmosphere to the bride and the groom. Above all Asmini flowers would refresh the bedroom with sweet cool smell throughout the day, night or more.

#### *Mlua*

Sweet fragrance can be felt from the Mlua shrub from a distance like 100 m away. The sweet smell is much stronger at night and evening than during the day. These flowers also are used same way as the Asminis during wedding ceremonies. Mlua flowers are believed to have aphrodisiac qualities and are associated with seduction. They are mostly planted outside bedrooms windows or at the back balconies for the scent to waft in at night and keep the room fresh, cool and sweet smelling.



#### ***Asmini in bloom***

Family: Oleaceae | Kingdom: Plantae |  
Genus: Jasminum | Order: Lamiales | Common  
name: Jasmine | Digo name: Asmini

#### ***Mlua shrub***

Photo taken during wet and dry season respectively.  
Kingdom: plantae | Family: Annonaceae,  
Genus: Mkilua | Species: M.fragrans







### **Waridi plants**

Family: Rosaceae | Genus: Rosa | Common name:  
Red rose | Digo Name: Waridi



### **Ndagao grass (root and leaves)**

Botanical name: *Cyperus rotundus* | Common name:  
Purple nutsedge | Digo name: Ndagao

### **Dry Mrahani shrub** (dry season)

### **Fresh Mrehani Shrub** (wet season)

Botanical name: *Ocimum basilic* | Common name:  
Basil Sweet | Digo name: Mrahani



### **Mwaridi**

Mwaridi are common pink roses. They are of various colour foliages with pleasant scent and it symbolise a different theme during wedding, pre-wedding and engagement events. According to the Digo, Mwaridi conveys the feelings of love, appreciation, sympathy and gratitude. The fragranced flowers are hanged on verandas, living rooms, bedrooms and can also be mounted on vehicles ferrying the brides. Isolated plants of Waridi can be found in homesteads and also can be planted in large scale commercial farms e.g in Naivasha Kenya. Mwaridi are the most valued flowers that are thematic not forgetting its sweet smell which would refresh the surroundings.

### **Ndago**

Ndago a grass-like plant which is an African native and is widespread in our locality. It grass has nodes in its roots which smell sweet. What matters is the fragrance from the nodes where our great grandparents could pluck them out of the roots, dried and grinded them into powder using mortar and pestle. The fine powder could be mixed with coconut oil and turned into thick paste ready for consumption. The cream smells so sweet and was normally used as body lotion which provides ample hydration and nourishment to the skin. It has a strong, attractive fragrance which could be used any time of the day or night out during local festivals

### **Mrahani**

This is a plant also found in our Digo geographical area and is essential for its fragrance on its leaves. The leaves are plucked out, squeezed



into pulp, and then immersed in coconut oil until ready for consumption. The entire preparation process is home made using the available simple tools such as pestle and mortar to squeeze the leaves. Like Ndago, Mrahani could be used as routine body care or during night or day out on festivals or traditional events.

### ***Matoro***

Matoro are commonly known as water lilies which are mostly found in wetlands such as small lakes, ponds or in swamps. They are of wide arrays of colours and fragrance. Culturally, Digo people could pluck the lilies and mix them with the bathing water resulting in soothing smell all day after bath especially for women.

### ***Mkadi***

It is a shrub like plant which grows on the coast line especially along the beaches here in Kenya. The plant produces a pineapple-like fruit and flowers which give rise to a sweet smell. In this case the flowers could be plucked and covered in a cloth for a day or two within the house. Due to heat the flowers which are covered in a piece of cloth ripen more and fill the entire house with sweet fragrance which is very pleasant. This could be kept in bedrooms or verandas.

## **1.2. Beverages**

Various essences are used in our community as ingredients for sweet aromatic beverages. Their strong pleasant and sweet essence is the most lucrative and attractive in these drinks. Some of these which produce sweet aroma and fragrance are as below.



### ***Matoro flowers in a swamp***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Nymphaeaceae |  
Genus: Nymphaea nouchali | Common name:  
Water lilies | Digo name: Matoro

### ***Mkadi tree***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Pandanaceae | Genus  
name: Pandanus kirkii | Common name: Screw  
pine | Digo name: Mkadi







***Mdungu tree***

Genus: Fagara | Species: holtzianum |  
Common name: Wild lime | Digo name: Mdungu

***Mlimau tree***

Family: Plantae | Genus: Citrus | Species: limon |  
Common name: Lemon | Digo name: Mlimau



***Fresh Chivumbani Shrub*** (wet season)

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Lamiaceae | Genus:  
Ocimum africanas | Common Name: Holy Basil |  
Digo name: Chivumani

***Mszhumaa***

Kingdom: plantae | Class: Lillopsida | Family:  
Poaceae | Genes: Cymbopo | Common Name:  
Lemon grass | Digo Name: Mszhumaa





### *Chivumbani, Mdungu, Mszhumaa and Mlimau*

These are shrubs and trees which produce sweet smelling leaves and readily available within our Digo locality. The leaves from these are plucked and dipped in boiling water for like five minutes. Eventually the mix would turn into pale greenish, sweet smelling syrup. It can be used just like strong tea either in the morning, evening or both.

#### **1.3. Shift**

Long time ago people from our local community were prominent for their sweet fragrance and believed to have natural beauty and healing therapy. They used natural fragranced ingredients which they distilled in carrier oils to make their perfumes. Apparently, they were extracted from woody, fruity and common flowers.

As time goes by, essence, perfumes and fragrance use has evolved from the simple old organic extracts from shrubs to more complex and synthetic mixes that brought together multiple components. Population increase and high demand in organic perfumes pose a threat to natural resources sustainability due to over-exploitation. Hence the need for transformation was prompted. More synthetic mixtures emerged with great varieties on shelves. Various chemicals are used to manufacture contemporary perfumes. Differences between homemade fragrance and the perfumes one can buy in the shop today concern:

- **Cost:** Homemade fragrance and essence are cheaper than the modern perfumes in shops today. Spray perfumes are expensive because alcohol and other dis-

tillers are used to mix up. The beautiful bottle, the package box and the trade-marks are all costly. Hence the shelf price is double or triple as much as the organic, pure homemade perfumes.

- **Fragrance resilience:** Natural perfumes and oils never get away so easily. They stick to your skin or hair much longer i.e. more than four hours depending on the fragrance blend. Most of the modern scents, though they seem stronger at first, they dissipate into the air shortly. That is the chemical reaction of alcohol when mixed with oxygen.
- **Sensitivity to skin:** Natural oil perfumes are mild and safer for sensitive skin compared to synthetic alcoholic perfumes. Alcohol based perfumes are highly flammable and allergic. They can cause burns and inflammation when they don't work with your skin chemistry.
- **Scent Power:** Organic perfumes, oils and fragrance do not have a wider throw. They aren't strong and don't diffuse too widely. If you apply them, only those who are at the close proximity to you will be able to smell it. Simply one becomes the primary recipient of its pleasurable smell and you won't have to offend those who are around. Due to alcohol based mix, modern perfumes in shops diffuse widely and can be felt from a distance. When sprayed it lands on skin, clothes or hair the rest evaporates in the air. That means your mates would be able smell your scent even before you come closer to them.

*who should not have one.*

*In the middle of it all was a girl*

*on three wheels,*

- Have the ways in which perfumes incense etc are used changed? Perfumes and incense use have not changed to a bigger margin only that they are nowadays introduced in daily or routine hygiene. The sacred function of these products is not lost in time, though it goes on with the secular ones by our days. It now occupies everyday life of common people. It is now linked to the myths of beauty and care and thus it begins to take a fundamental role in everyday life. Most of the people nowadays fumigate their houses with different fragrances on verandas and in rooms not occasionally but almost daily for freshness and beauty.

#### ***Mwamtserere shrub***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Lamiaceae | Genus: Hoslundia | Species: H. Opposite | Digo name: Mwamtserere

## **2. Plants and herbs applied in healing purposes**

Anciently, medicine men and local doctors exclusively made use of local plants and herbs to prepare appropriate doses for their sick patients. They used different expert procedures such as crushing (mainly), soaking, smoking and even boiling the plant parts to mould them into suitable forms of intake. As a matter of course, they made use of the whole plant starting from leaves, seeds, flowers, stem and roots. Below are some of the herbs widely used then, their preparation and specific cures:

#### ***Mwamtserere (mgongolo)***

Ancient inhabitants of the area specifically used the leaves and roots of Mwamtserere in treatment of injuries and monthly stomach cramps of ladies. In case of a cut say on the finger, its leaves are smashed using mortar and pestle and the paste (gravy) is tied using a traditional small bandage around the cut to stop bleeding. Traditionally it is as significant as methylated spirit. In the other case of the monthly belly cramps of ladies, Mwamtserere roots were well boiled and the juice drank by the lady to minimise or even halt the pains completely.



crying and begging to be



## ***Mjasasa***

It has nutritional and medical importance. Mjasasa was commonly used in treatment of nausea. Nausea that attacks most especially in dawns was mitigated using its leaves. Its dry leaves were crushed into small particles then someone incensed or smoked his body using a censer in a room and eventually felt alright. Nutritionally, its dark purple fruits are edible and delicious specifically, with quite high vitamin content. Mjasasa sticks also are traditionally used as tooth brush. The sticks are chewed at the tips to expose its fibrous tissues which are essential for scrubbing our teeth and the results are always amazing.

## ***Mtengedzi***

Mtengedzi was specifically used in treatment of stomach upsets and cramps believed to have been caused by evil or envious eye. Ancient inhabitants used to uproot its roots, scratch it, then using a sufuria with water and shake the water with the root to produce froth. Then apply the froth over the stomach. It cools.

## ***Mwamsusumbika***

Mwamsusumbika was mainly used in three important ways traditionally. Firstly, traditional singers used to prepare their throats to entertain the audience in celebrations such as weddings by chewing its roots. The chewed roots softened their throats enabling production of a soft euphonious voice. Secondly, medicine men also used its leaves to treat asthma. The leaves were crushed, then mix the paste with coconut juice (madafu) and then fed



### ***Mjasasa shrub***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Verbenaceae | Genus: Lantana | Species: L. camara | Swahili name: Mshomoro | Digo name: Mjasasa

### ***Mtengedzi shrub***

Kingdom: Planate | Family: Rubiaceae | Genus: Catunaregam | Species: C. spinosa | Digo name: Mtengedzi/Mdzongodzongo



### ***Mwamsusumbika tree***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Fabaceae | Genus: Abrus | Species: A. precatorius | Digo name: Mwamsusumbika



pushed so she could go on a journey.





### ***Chisikolo (climber)***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Lauraceae | Genus: Cassytha | Species: C. filiformis | Digo name: Chisikolo

### ***Mkunazi***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Rhamnaceae | Genus: Ziziphus | Species: Z. Mauritiana | Digo name: Mkunazi



it to the patient and help to recuperate. Thirdly, its seeds were also used to make kayambas, a musical instrument played by shaking.

### ***Chisikolo***

Chisokolo threads was the part mainly used. The threads could be used as a remedy to treat ulcers and other stomach complications. People used to crush the threads, squeeze them to get the juice. Then the juice is drunk by the patient over time to cure the ulcers. Those having neck pain and fatigue wore a thick neck rest made from the threads then slept with it on and got better. It had a quite therapeutic effect in this case.

### ***Mkunazi***

Mkunazi leaves and fruits were the most used. Its leaves were plucked in odd numbers, say 27, then used to treat conditions like unprecedented headaches and pains. They were crushed, then the gravy was mixed with water. A portion drank and the other added to showering water, and also for therapeutic purposes. It was also applied in the washing of bodies before burial. Water mixed with its leaves was believed to have a more cleansing power. Its fruits are also edible and have a high nutritive value laden with different vitamins.

### ***Mvugah***

Mvugah leaves were most widely used to treat stomach problems on both young and old but most especially on the old. Its young leaves were crushed and the paste drunk mostly twice a day to relief pain. It was recommended as a good painkiller.

*And the Journey pushed the girl to her journey.*



### ***Mtsalafu***

Mtsalafu was mainly used on kids, especially infants. Infants normally undergo much pain in their bellies due to unhealed navel. The herb's roots were either boiled or soaked in water and the juice drunk to the infant to mitigate the pain. Its leaves were also crushed and the paste applied on a painful belly and massaged it. Its scent could be the healing portion in this.

### ***Mgunga***

Mgunga roots is the part mainly used. Its uprooted roots were mainly used as a water treatment herb. They were dug, washed and macerated into small pieces, then dropped into a can with drinking water. It therefore protected people against cholera and other waterborne diseases. The roots could also be boiled or soaked in water and the juice drunk by people to protect them against pneumonia attacks and even cure the already infected.

### ***Mgunga tree***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Fabaceae | Genus: Vachellia | Species: V. tortuosa | Digo name: Mgunga



***Mvugah shrub*** (*The pale green shrub pointed by dry post at the centre of the page*)

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Lamiaceae | Genus: Coleus | Species: C. australis | Digo names: Mvuga/Mumbu/Gala

### ***Mtsalafu Shrub***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Fabaceae | Genus: Senna / Species: S. occidentalis | Swahili name: Mnuka uvundo | Digo name: Mtsalafu







#### ***Chivumanyuchi shrub***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Rubiaceae | Genus:  
Agathisanthemum | Species: A. bojeri | Digo name:  
Chivumanyuchi

#### ***Chivumanyuchi***

Chivumanyuchi plants had its importance derived from its leaves and roots. Its roots were specifically boiled or soaked in water, and then the juice or water is fed to patients suffering from stomach aches or cramps. It was preferentially fed to babies with stomach aches to alleviate their pain. Its leaves were also dried, then mixed with charcoal, then burnt in a censer and the sick babies or those having influenza smoked their bodies with the smoke as a cure. Ancient farmers also used to burn dried Chivumanyuchi plants on their farms during preparation for planting to prevent evil eyes from evil people who may pass near the farms.

#### ***Mzinje (Muringa)***

Muringa seeds and leaves were the parts mostly used in the past. Medicine men used its seeds to minimise or cure hypertension or high blood pressure. They advised their patients to either chew the seeds dried. Or they used to crush the dried seeds and add the powder to water and fed the water to their patients. It helped to reduce their blood pressure eventually. They also used the seeds to cure diabetes. Patients suffering from diabetes like those suffering hypertension were advised to chew the seeds or drink the water with seed powder. The Muringa leaves were also cooked and eaten as a vegetable and had a high nutritive value.

#### ***Muringa tree***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Moringaceae | Genus:  
Moringa | Species: M. Oleifera | Digo name: Mzinje



#### ***Golonje***

Golonje is a common medicinal short thick plant that store water in its leaves (succulent). This water filled tissues produces a gel-like substance which can be used in treating wounds,



dental plaque, managing blood sugars, skin problems and preventing body wrinkles. It contains antioxidants, antiviral, antibacterial and antiseptic properties. It is widely available in almost all Kenyan coastal villages.

### ***Mwarubaini***

Arubaini means 40 in Digo dialect. The name derives from its powerful qualities for treating 40 ailments ranging from fungul infections, bacterial infections, skin infections etc. Digo community use this tree for treating skin infections, Malaria, stomach upsets and as pesticides to plants as it is unpalatable to almost all pests. The tree is widely distributed within coast region and it can easily be obtained. Leaves and bark can be boiled and its solution be taken orally or bathed by the patient to treat Malaria and other stomach upsets. This plant is very important but should be used carefully within a required quantity as it may cause premature abortions to pregnant women when taken in large amount.

### ***Mgomba***

Mgomba is a local name for banana tree. It is huge elongated herbaceous plant with no woody stem. A part from being source of food, Mgomba can be used to treat sores or cuts. When Banana leaves and stems are cut, juicy substance oozes from the plant which can be tapped and externally applied on sores for treatment. This plant is readily found in home-steads, garden and farms.

### ***Mgomba tree***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Musaceae |  
Genus: M. paradisiaca | Common Name:  
Banana tree | Digo name: Mgomba



### ***Golonje shrub***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Aloaceae | Genus: Aloe |  
Species: A. Barbadensis miller | Common name:  
A. vera | Digo name: Golonje



### ***Mwarubaini tree***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Meliaceae | Genus:  
Azadirachta | Species: A. Indica | Common name  
NeemTree | Digo name: Marubaini





### ***Mstafeli tree***

Kingdom: Plantae | Famili: Annonaceae | Genus: Annona | Species: A. muricata | Common name: soursop tree or Graviola | Digo name: Mstafeli

### ***Mstafeli***

Mstafeli is an evergreen small tree which is health beneficial. It is also commonly known as soursop. The leaves of this tree can be crushed or blended with water. The extract from this mixture can be taken orally to control blood sugars, blood pressure and also treats several types of cancer. Mstafeli leaves can alternatively be dried up, crushed and its powder can be mixed with water or porridge. It is a natural remedy for viruses and relieves pain. This tree is available in Africa including Kenya and East Africa. Mostly it is found in our rural homes planted for its sweet fruits (Stafeli) and its therapeutic powers.

### ***Mtomoko***

Kingdom: Plantae | Family: Annanoceae | Genus: Annona | Species: A. Cherimola | Common Name: Custard apple | Digo name: Mtomoko

### ***Mtomoko***

Mtomoko is a common shrub which is widely distributed in our local Digo area. Just like Mwarubaini, Mtomoko is rampant and can be easily obtained. Leaves of this plant possess a strong pungent smell which is significant in relieving dizziness. When someone suffers dizziness,



leaves are crushed and the patient gets relieved by inhaling its smell close to the nose and mouth. Traditionally this has been used and still very useful in our modern days. Its sweet fruits are edible and very nutritive and healthy for all age types. It contains potassium and magnesium which regulate and prevents high blood pressure.

Depending on what surprises Udumu v



### 3. Proverbs and sayings relating to perfumes and fragrance

These are words of wisdom which carry meaningful says and are normally thematic to the subject matter. They range from simplest phrases which need not any interpretation, to most complexes which requires translation and interpretation for simplicity. These proverbs are traditionally used to convey certain message to spouses, friends or peers. It is believed that those who prefer to use these proverbs are wiser and most intelligent people. Old folks could simple use proverbs in normal dialogues, speeches or formal communications. At times they could be used in poems or songs to emphasise a certain themes or call which needs to be excised. Other preverbal phrases are written on Khangas (wrappers) which can be used as gifts or souvenirs with powerful words of encouragement, sympathy, empathy or love. Some proverbs which relates to perfumes and fragrances are as follows.

- a. *Kukala mnono bila ya mafu'a ga mzingo.*  
There's no beauty without perfume.
- b. *Mafu'a ga mzingo ganaonyesa roho nono.*  
Perfume is a reflector of a good heart.
- c. *Mafu'a ga mzingo nkurenha raha ndani ya nyumba ka rohoni.*  
Perfume brings happiness in a house like in the heart.
- d. *Mambo mairi nkumuendeza mchetu kayyalika, matzozige na mafu'age ga mzingo.*  
Two things make the women unforgettable, their tears and their perfume.

- e. *Mafu'a ga mzingo, rangi na mawira nkugwirana phamwenga.*  
Perfumes, colours and music echo one another.

### 4. Names of local types of fragrances

Local perfumes are the original homemade fragrances which are used commonly within our costal homestead especially within our Digoland. They contain no additives or alcohols and mostly are used in their original being. These are some of the local perfumes used currently:

- Mawaridi
- Coconut
- Asmini
- Mlua

### 5. Traditional imported fragrances

Traditionally, our old folks would prefer to taste the imported perfumes which were unique and exotic. They could visit stalls in open market places such as Marikiti in Mombasa to check on varieties depending on the purpose, be it wedding or funerals. They range from mild simple applications to concentrated strong perfumes which could be applied in small quantities depending on their constituents. Below are some examples of these fragrances.

- Bint Sudan
- Al Bakhoor
- Al Udi
- Ubani
- Uvumba
- Marashi Jabale
- Mafuta Ya Wandari

## 6. Modern imported perfumes

These are some of the contemporary perfumes which are imported mostly from the United Arab Emirates in Asia. They are also available in general supermarkets and small Arab stalls in towns within our coastal towns. They can be used by both genders but some can be either masculine or feminine. Just like other fragrance they are also seductive and romantic. Mostly are applied routinely or specifically during events and celebrations. Some of them are as below.

- Desert Sultan – Emerald (Men)
- Dirham (Women)
- Konouz (Both)
- White leather (Both)
- Suqraat - Lattafa (Both)
- Al Ibdaa (Women)
- Al Sayad (Women)
- Al isra (Both)
- Arba Wardat (Women)
- Mariam (Women)
- Bahar Al Gharam (Both)
- Yulali - Swiss Arabian (Both)
- Haramain Tanasuk (Both)
- Manasib (Both)

## 7. Conclusion

Fragrance and perfumes are essential compounds which are used all round the world signifying different themes within various communities. Both traditional and modern perfumes are of equal importance depending on where, how and why is used. However nowadays people prefers modern fragrance and perfumes in relation to the traditional natural and organic components. We realised that people are shifting from the traditional to contemporary practices as the time goes by.

There are a lot of herbs, shrubs and trees which are used in treating different kinds of illness. Despite the modern world we are living in, still traditional treatment out of these plants is widely used compared to fragrances and perfumes. There a countless number of shrubs especially in Africa which are powerful and contain healing properties. These trees are very important and also available in Kenya coastal strip. More research is still required to explore more and more treatment and cosmetic solutions.



was taken by surprise.

She had met a Date that lost control of herself.

12.12.1963.