Cocoa Butter and Tonka Beans

By : Juggernaut

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Subba Rao

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â Then I married a Muslim and he changed my name to Bagum,â the old lady summarized her life changing experience in a few short sentences.

Juggernaut met the old lady on a farm in the outback during his roaming days through the island to break boredom while looking for a job. Begum lived alone in a small cinder block home looking after a small cocoa plantation that accounted for less than an acre or so. She was not even sure where her property boundaries were.

On some weekends, Juggernaut spent time with Bagum helping her with cutlassing or cutting grass weeds using a machete. It is a hard job; he wondered how the old lady worked whole day on the farm. She always walked with a sharp machete as if it is her hand ornament. She wore a scarf all the time to cover her head, Indian style and spoke English with pure local accent sometimes inter mixing with few Indian words like â betaâ â paniâ and â roti.â

Begum used the machete effortlessly to cut loose red ripe cocoa pods from the tree and rip open the pods to expose the cocoa beans while Juggernaut enjoyed eating the sweet pulp that surround the beans. The pulp tastes just like Custard-Apple. The separated beans were sun dried on a metal wire mesh and ground to make pulp. The pulp is highly flavored and extremely greasy with cocoa butter, and tasted bitter. When mixed with hot milk and sugar, there is nothing that compares with this homemade cocoa milk drink with so much flavored cocoa fat floating in the cup; the after taste lingers in the mouth for hours after drinking it.

Among the cocoa trees were tall Tonka Bean trees that provided needed shade to cocoa trees. These trees shed long pods that have black Tonka beans. The beans when crushed has sweet smell like vanilla, almost one is tempted to taste them. Begum sold Cocoa and Tonka beans to a trader in export business. Apparently Tonka beans are used in making scented candles and lotions, and some even use in food preparation for flavor.

Working with Begum, Juggernaut learned how to use machete effortlessly to cut weeds or rip cocoa pods. She lived alone with her parrot as old as she was in birdie years. Begum has a wealth of information on cocoa farming and Tonka Beans, whatever it is worth. Begum lived of the land; growing vegetables and minding few hens for eggs and meat. Her needs for frugal living were simple; occasionally she shopped at Royâ s Rum shop for staples and a bottle of rum. When it comes to cooking, she curried everything from chicken to bodie (long Indian pale green beans); for breakfast it was roti (Indian flat bread) and a piece of curried chicken, for lunch again roti and a piece of curried chicken and for the dinner white rice, greens, sometimes dahl (boiled split peas paste) and piece of curried chicken.

â I wish you make stew chicken for a change,â suggested Juggernaut once.

Sure she did; with tomatoes, scallion with soy sauce and a dash of â Angostura Bittersâ that tasted and smelled like cardamom. The Island is known for producing the world famous â Angostura Aromatic Bittersâ used to flavor drinks and some dishes. Begum believed in God Almighty but never mentioned religion by any name. She never said, she was tired of working.

After hard day working in the field, Juggernaut sit with her on her front wooden porch making oleâ talk, drinking rum and coke and smoking â Broadwayâ cigarette, the only brand Begum like for it is strong though Juggernaut liked â Du Maurierâ brand for its light taste. When it comes to cricket, she was discriminatory in the sense she loved only Indian team though she has a soft spot for Pakistani team; she always talked about old time Indian Cricket players like Nari Contractor and how he got hurt bad from a fast ball bowled by famous West Indian bowler Charlie Griffith. Among Cricketersâ she loved Rohan Kanhai from Guyana. â He can bat you know, made big scores in test matches,â â I understand he likes to drink, we Indians like to drink rum, nah,â she said looking at the â Old Oakâ rum bottle, half empty. Juggernaut drank more than his share. Smoking Broadway cigarette and drinking rum went hand in hand; smoking was a catalyst for drinking.

â You listen to calypso all the time,â â for an Indian you are different,â said Begum watching Juggernaut listening to calypso music on radio.

â Yeah, I love calypso.â

â Whom you like?â

â Sparrow, Kitchener and Shadow,â â once I am done with studies I start writing calypso.â

â What you write about?â

â About everything.â

â You go write and let me hear when you done writing,â

â I may write about cocoa butter and tonka beans, and curry chicken.â

â You are a saga boy now,â â you never go back home, I know that,â said Begum looking at Juggernaut making dance movements to loud calypso music.

Drinking hot chocolate milk brings back memories of wiry old Begum with a head scarf, a cigarette dangling from her mouth and a machete in her hand ready to work at any time of the day.

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