

THE MIGRATION OF INDIANS TO EASTERN AFRICA:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE ISMAILI COMMUNITY, 1866-1966

by

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## ABSTRACT

Much of the Ismaili settlement in Eastern Africa, together with several other immigrant communities of Indian origin, took place in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. This thesis argues that the primary mover of the migration were the edicts, or *Farmans*, of the Ismaili spiritual leader. They were instrumental in motivating Ismailis to go to East Africa. Although there were other Indian groups from the general geographical area of Western Indian and Gujarat who also migrated to East Africa, the crucial factor in the migration of Ismailis were the edicts or *Farmans* of the Imams. My thesis argues that the *Farmans* or edicts played a very important role in persuading Ismailis to move to East Africa. Though other groups from Gujarat and Western India also moved to East Africa, the Ismailis followed the edicts or *Farmans of the Imam and this was the major factor for the Ismailis to move*. Ismaili history is replete with migratory movements, whether due to persecution or economic reasons. The religious leader of the Ismailis, the Imam or the “*Imam of the Time*” as he is known as by the Ismailis, including all the Aga Khans to date, sought to bring the Ismailis out of their poverty and famine-stricken land and settle into more favored economic areas under British jurisdiction. This thesis will demonstrate that Aga Khan III actively promoted the movement of the Ismailis to East Africa. His edicts shaped the migration of Ismailis and they provided uneducated people the reason as well as the motivation to go together with a sense of reassurance.

I will use personal oral histories which add to the historiography to make my case for both Ismailis and the Ithnasheris, the largest Shia Muslim community. Since Ismailis are generally a closed community and actively practiced *Taqia (secret practice)*, I will use whatever written material I have been able to find to make my case. The Ithnasheris were also Khojas who had split from the main Khoja Ismaili community in India because of their objection to the

control being exercised by the Imam, Aga Khan I, who had arrived in Sind Province in 1843 from Persia. Though they were part of the Shia sect, the Ismailis who converted to the Ithnasheri sect, became Shias but maintained the Khoja name. To support my argument, I draw on oral histories of both Ismailis and Ithnasheris as there is no written record of any pronouncements by the leaders of the Ismailis and it is entirely oral history by word of mouth. This thesis adds substantially to the historiography of the subject matter. Since written accounts are not available, my oral history recollections accomplish this.

For my granddaughters

and

My daughter, Aliya

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Your grandfathers crossed India to come to Africa.  
You have to cross right up to the Atlantic, and who knows,  
later I may send you to America.

–Aga Khan III, in a farman to his East African followers, 1951

The goal of this study is to determine how the Aga Khans motivated Ismailis and enabled the Ismaili Khojas of Kachchh and Kathiawar from Gujarat in Western India to migrate to eastern Africa. The religious leader of the Ismailis, the Imam or the “*Imam of the Time*” as he is known as by the Ismailis, including all the Aga Khans to date, sought to bring the Ismailis out of their poverty and famine-stricken land and settle into more favored economic areas under British jurisdiction. This thesis will demonstrate that Aga Khan III actively promoted the movement of the Ismailis to East Africa. His edicts shaped the migration of Ismailis. Beginning in the second century, from references in the ‘Periplus of the Erythrean Sea’, the Greco-Roman guide for navigation and trading opportunities in the areas from the Red Sea to the southern and western Indian Ocean, the seafaring communities of Western India which included Sind and Gujarat, had developed extensive and deep trading networks in the western Indian Ocean.

Ismailis had economic and religious reasons for migrating to East Africa. The main motivator were the *farmans* (edicts) of the Imam. For his mostly pastoral, uneducated followers, it was the firm belief that their leader, the Imam, knew what the future held and his advice to move to East Africa would alleviate their poverty and misery from drought and famines.

Persian Gulf and merchant seamen from Western India have a long history of trading with the East African coast. However, unlike the Arabs and the Persians, the Indians did not naturally settle in this region before the eighteenth century. The Indian merchants played an

important intermediary trading role along the western coast of India and the Persian Gulf. After having endured the Portuguese interference in the triangular trade network between Kachchh, Muscat and Zanzibar, Kachchhi traders regained their prominence again in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They made a base in Muscat in Oman in or around 1820.

Muscat became home to Khoja Ismailis, Khoja Ithnasheris, Muslim Memons, and Hindu Bhatias<sup>1</sup>. A major influence in the expansion of Indian trade was the re-establishment of the Omani Sultanate's influence on the island of Zanzibar, off the east coast of Africa. Together with British rule in India and the British Navy's supremacy in the Indian ocean, Indian subjects traded securely under Britain's protective flag. By the time the nineteenth century approached, Portugal was no longer a threat or hindrance to their movements.

Modern migration theory talks about the motivational approach of decision making. Migration is an interdisciplinary field, taking from sociology, political science, law, economics, demography, geography, psychology as articulated by Brettel C. and Hollifield J.<sup>2</sup> Of the several theories the most prominent one explaining why migration begins is the Neoclassical Economics macro theory. the New Economics of Migration theoretical model which gave us the following assumptions in response to Neoclassical theory,

- a) Rational individuals calculate the cost benefit of moving and have concluded that they would receive a positive net return from moving from their country of origin.

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (Oxford, UK: James Curry Ltd, 1987), 21

<sup>2</sup>Caroline Brettel and James F. Hollifield, Eds. *Migration Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 51.

- b) If by calculating that the current earnings and their future earnings, they find that the future earnings in the destination country are going to be greater.
- c) Economic policies in both the sending and the receiving country can influence the size of the migration.<sup>3</sup>

This was true for the inhabitants of Kachchh and Gujarat. In the late nineteenth century, large scale migration from Kachchhi and Kathiawari ports in Gujarat to East Africa began partly because of trading opportunities presented by the British government's plan to import large numbers of indentured laborers from India to build the rail line from Mombasa, Kenya on the coast to Kampala, Uganda. This gave Indian traders a built-in market for their wares of food and sundries. Indians originating from the region of Gujarat from the provinces of Kachchh, Kathiawar, a neighboring province of Kachchh, and Sind (present day Pakistan) boarded "dhows"<sup>4</sup> from the ports of Mandvi, Porbander and Diu located in Western India, and came to Zanzibar, Mombasa, Tanga and points south in large numbers. Ismaili Muslims, together with other Indians, also migrated to East Africa at that time.

Dr. Chayya Goswami in her book, *The Call of the Sea*, describes how the Kachchhis were forced by nature.<sup>5</sup> Since foreign trade was totally dependent on the Kachchhis to go out and bring foreign trade to its shores, she talks about how the lack of rainfall did not allow the sandy soil to flourish. The lack of rain caused dustbowl conditions and in 1803, locusts destroyed the crops. Together with famines came earthquakes.<sup>6</sup> This led to widespread poverty and for

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Dhows are ubiquitous to the Indian Ocean. These are large ocean-going lateen-rigged sailing ships, which are still present on the Indian, Persian Gulf and African coasts.

<sup>5</sup> Chhaya Goswami, *The Call of the Sea* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 59

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Ismailis, the Imam's advice was to leave Kachchh and move to Zanzibar. Ismailis who were impoverished were easily motivated to migrate by stories of wealth originating out of East Africa from other early settlers of Ismailis. Sailors carrying letters from East Africa would bring news from coastal towns from these Ismailis for their relatives. Another 'push' factor was wanting to better their lot and that was not difficult given that they were surrounded by natural disasters such as famine and plague.

In Chapter 2, I show the nature of the famines, created by both the colonizer and weather, I will also elaborate on British Colonial policies, especially their need for labor in their East African colonies, the role of the Aga Khans, the Imams of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, and the role of the Sultan of Muscat and Ismaili merchants in Muscat, Oman, as related to further Ismaili settlement in Zanzibar. Chapter 3 is a brief on the Ismaili religion. It introduces the reader to this secretive religion. In Chapter 4, I relate the conversations I had with a few Ismailis in Vancouver and Toronto.

Ismailism originated out of the schism between Shia and Sunni at the time of the prophet's death in 632 CE when there was a crisis of succession. The Sunnis declared Abu Bakr (d. 634 CE) as the caliph. Others including those who would eventually be known as Ismailis, felt that Ali Ibn Talib, the prophet's first cousin and son-in-law, was the rightful spiritual and temporal heir to the prophet. Ismailis believe that only the direct descendants of Ali can claim the mantle of Imam. During its height, the Ismaili empire extended from Egypt to Spain during the Fatimid period (909 – 1171 AD) but when the empire fell, they fled to Persia to a mountain fortress, Alamut, led by their leader, Hassan bin Sabbah. Hassan bin Sabbah came to be known as the "Old man of the mountain". He created a defensive group that became famous in Western

history as “the Assassins”.<sup>7</sup> A French historian (Silvestre De Sacy), who had a lifelong interest in the Druze of Syria and Iran, prepared an important memoir in May of 1809, which he read before the Institut de France.<sup>8</sup> With an intensive reading of the Arabic manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, he finally put to rest the legend associated with this group that Hassan bin Sabbah had given them hashish and then sent them out to terrorize their enemies. Ismaili and Muslim sources that have come to light in modern times do not corroborate this etymology of the word *assassin*.<sup>9</sup> Given that they did not have the numbers or means to defend themselves against a much larger and better equipped enemy, Hassan’s followers used terror as a technique to strike fear in their enemies.

Ismailis reject this moniker but have had to live with this reputation. Ismailis were eventually defeated by Helugu, Genghis Khan’s son, on November 19, 1256<sup>10</sup> They went into hiding to escape decimation by their natural enemies, the Sunni Muslims. Ismaili missionaries, in the meantime, had already journeyed to north western India in the twelfth century and converted the local Hindu population to Ismailism starting approximately before 1094 AD.<sup>11</sup>

The Khojas were originally Hindus of a trading caste known as the Lohanas inhabiting the villages and towns of Upper Sind. They were converted to the Shia Imami Ismaili faith by Pir<sup>12</sup> Sadardin<sup>13</sup>, a missionary sent by the Imam, who gave them the name of “Khoja”. According to Ismaili traditions, Pir Sadardin came from Khorasan in modern day northeast Persia and was

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<sup>7</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends – Myths of the Ismailis* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 1994), 88

<sup>8</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Ismailis – Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ.Press, 1990), 18

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

<sup>10</sup> Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Crown Publishers,2004), 179

<sup>11</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Ismailis – Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ.Press, 1990), 478

<sup>12</sup> Pir is a title usually given by the Imam to a learned and spiritual missionary.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 479

an Ismaili Dai (missionary) sent by the Imam, Shah Islam Shah, an ancestor of the current Aga Khan. From Sind, the Khoja conversion spread into Kachchh, then Kathiawar, and through Gujarat to Bombay. The word of the Imam was law and spiritual and material rewards followed those who obeyed him. This was also confirmed to me by Ismailis I took oral histories from in Vancouver.

Ismailis who lived in Kachchh and Kathiawar were mostly subsistence farmers, petty tradesmen and laborers. Because of a lack of literacy and institutions of higher learning, we find no written accounts, but I have unearthed a source of oral histories, collective memory, and aspirations; some people I interviewed have compiled their own oral histories which supplement the historiography. The Ismailis ended up being the largest group among settled Indians in East Africa, not counting those that came as indentured laborers, to build the railway line from the coast to Uganda

### **East African Migration and Trading Environment**

The Indian Ocean was a veritable hotbed of activity in the nineteenth century. European powers were vying for spheres of influence and competing for trade and resources. In 1878, the Scramble for Africa was launched by the European powers at the Congress of Berlin.<sup>14</sup> It was finalized in 1884 by the European powers. Great Britain was already in control of the Indian Ocean. The other European powers were jockeying to take parts of Africa for themselves. Slave traders were boarding captives from the eastern coast of Africa bound for plantations in Brazil and the Caribbean. Zanzibar, which was one of the entry ports for Indian migration, was

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa – 1876-1912*, (London: Abacus, 1991), 201



experiencing a shift in its economy due to the increase in demand for Ivory in Europe and America. This, in turn, spurred the migration of traders from Muscat and the Middle East, as well as from Kachchh and Gujarat.

Ibn Battuta, the Muslim scholar and explorer, is said to have visited East Africa in 1331<sup>15</sup> and was subsequently exposed to an Afro-Oriental Islamic culture. He does not mention any evidence or knowledge of the existence of an Indian population. However, he describes he found a couple of Indian linguistic and cultural elements among the Swahili coastal peoples, i.e. tambuu (betel leaves) and popoo (areca nuts). Around 1150AD, Al Idrisi writes of an Indian settlement at the mouth of the Zambezi River.

By the time Vasco da Gama arrived in East Africa in 1498, there was already a notable presence of Indians there, and a Muslim Indian pilot, Kanji Malaam, from the seafaring Badala clan, took Vasco De Gama's expedition from Malindi, Kenya to the western Indian port of Kalikat.<sup>16</sup> According to Freeman-Grenville<sup>17</sup>, a Professor of African History at SUNY New Paltz, the Portuguese mention some permanent Indian settlement on the Kenyan coast as well as regular visits by the Indians from India. Another historian, Cooper<sup>18</sup> also discusses title deeds by Shia Muslim Indians on the Kenya coast during the 1500s. Atkins Hammerton, the first British Consul and Political Agent sent to Zanzibar in 1841, reported that the "Indian merchant class was indigenized"<sup>19</sup>. This meant that they were treated with the same rights as native traders and

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<sup>15</sup> Indians and Indic languages in Eastern Africa: The Status of South Asian Languages in Eastern Africa. Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi, Dept. of Linguistics & Philology, Uppsala University, Sweden.

<sup>16</sup> Makrand Mehta, "Gujarati Business Communities in East African: Major Historical Trends," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.36, No.20 (May 19-25, 2001), p.1742

<sup>17</sup> G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, *The East African Coast 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.* (London: Rex Collings Ltd, 1975), 66-74

<sup>18</sup> Indians and Indic languages in Eastern Africa: The Status of South Asian Languages in Eastern Africa. Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi, Dept. of Linguistics & Philology, Uppsala University, Sweden.

<sup>19</sup> Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (Oxford, UK: James Curry Ltd, 1987), 203

were considered to be part of the general population. Any disputes with them or against them were settled by the Omani governor of Zanzibar and not through some other venue or courts. This class of Indian merchants of Muscat were an offshoot of those who started arriving in Zanzibar in 1804. By 1819, as noted by Captain Smee, there were 214 Indian merchant houses in Zanzibar Town alone. The majority of these were from the kingdom of Kachchh in northwest India. Still, in the 1830s, the capital city of Mandvi in Kachchh was the Indian port with the largest trade with East Africa<sup>20</sup>. It was later superseded by Bombay, After the Omani invasion and occupation of the East African coast in 1821, Zanzibar Town became the political and commercial capital of the whole region. Indian presence rose and became extremely important to the Sultan. Their presence in Oman was under his rule but the merchants also controlled the banking and the lending to the Sultan for his government.

Seyyid Said, the Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar, because of his military, commercial and matrimonial ties with India, and close cooperation with the British in Bombay, encouraged Indian immigration to Oman and his possessions in East and Central Africa to finance the caravan trade with the interior and administration of the ports.

By 1886, there were 6,000 Indians in British East Africa, i.e. Kenya Colony and Uganda Protectorate. Indian pioneers were in the interior of Tanganyika and Uganda long before the Europeans, for example, Musa Mzuri, an Indian trader, was in Tabora in 1825<sup>21</sup> (before Speke and Burton in 1860). Alidina Visram, one of the richest business men of the late nineteenth

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Indians and Indic languages in Eastern Africa: The Status of South Asian Languages in Eastern Africa. Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi, Dept. of Linguistics & Philology, Uppsala University, Sweden, 2

century in East Africa, established his business in Kampala in 1896, before British settlement there.

During the nineteenth century, in Kenya and Uganda, the British railway construction brought thousands of Indian workers. In 1895 there were 13,000 Indians in Kenya (mostly Hindus and Sikhs); and by 1891 there were 9,000 Indians settled in Zanzibar, who were mostly Kachchhi and Gujarati Muslim. Most of the indentured Indians in Kenya and Uganda returned to India at the completion of their contracts. The table below shows the number of repatriations prepared by the Uganda Railway Committee.

Table 1: Final Report of the Uganda Railway Committee Cd.2164 (1904) pp.12-13<sup>22</sup>

Year	Number Coolies Imported	Number Repatriated	Number Invalided	Deaths
1896-7	4269	...	200	121
1897-8	7131	...	705	340
1898-9	15593	773	1206	611
1899-1900	23379	2761	3424	1164
1900-1	31646	4109	5811	1984
1901-2	31983	9616	6354	2367
1901-3	31983	16312	6454	3493

During the First World War, the British India army went to Tanganyika to fight the Germans. When the First World War was over in 1918, the expansion of the British administration required the importation of several thousand Indians to help administer their new territories. Most Indian merchants in Tanzania Mainland (Tanganyika) were of Zanzibari origin, or they moved to the interior mainland areas after first settling in Zanzibar for a few years. Many

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<sup>22</sup> J.S. Mangat, *A history of Asians in East Africa c.1886-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 39

of them from all over East Africa later settled in Burundi, Rwanda, Congo, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and other parts of central and southern Africa, and a few went to the islands of the Comoros, Madagascar, Reunion, Seychelles and Mauritius.

After World War II, the Asian population in East Africa doubled reaching the highest figures in 1961/62, around the Independence of Tanganyika: Kenya 177,000, Uganda 77,000, Tanganyika 88,000 and Zanzibar 20,000 (Census reports of Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar).

The siren of independence in the British Colonies began in earnest after World War II. India was first out of the gate. The British treasury, exhausted after the massive expense of the war, was no longer interested in keeping control of its vast empire. This led to independence for India and then the African people, including Indians in East and Southern Africa, began to agitate for independence.

In the meanwhile, more businessmen ventured to East Africa. Financial services, which had begun in the early nineteenth century, were also provided to the Sultan of Muscat who relied on the Kachchhi finance to help expand his plantations in Zanzibar. Money lending was also extended to slave traders who used it to finance their caravans into the interior, capture slaves and bring them to the Zanzibar market. Stephen Morris, writing in the *British Journal of Sociology*, says that small settlements of Indian traders from Kachchh and Kathiawar (a sister province of Kachchh in Western India), have been living in the coastal areas of East Africa for

two thousand years. Indian traders never ventured into the interior to capture slaves. They relied on others to do that while satisfying themselves on money lending returns.<sup>23</sup>

While most of the Indian migration seems to have taken place during the building of the railway line from the coast to Uganda, the period from 1800- 1890 was the period when small Indian traders came to Africa to start a business or joined a relative already there to help expand his business. It was easy to assume that the Indian population in East Africa were descendants of coolie labor. The truth of the matter is that most of the indentured laborers went back at the termination of their contracts. The main business families that remained were from Kachchh, Gujarat and Kathiawar. Those that were brought in by the British Government to help administer the new colonial territories, remained in East Africa and established permanent settlement. This was especially true of people from Goa who were perhaps a little bit more anglicized than other Indians from other parts of Western India.

The Indians who came to settle established themselves as petty traders, shopkeepers and merchants. Indian merchants were a vital factor in the economic development of East Africa. Before the nineteenth century, their presence and businesses were limited, but already conspicuous. In the fifteenth century at Kilwa, some of the Indians were financiers, moneylenders or goldsmiths. Increasingly, the simultaneous growth in slave and ivory trades brought tremendous opportunities for them. According to Professor Abdul Sheriff of the University of Dar-es-salaam and the Director of the Zanzibar Indian Ocean Research Institute,

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Morris, "Indians in East Africa: A Study in a Plural Society", *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Sep. 1956), pp. 194-211 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/587991>

the ivory trade was the principal factor for Indian immigration. Captain Smee of the Indian Navy, on a reconnaissance mission for the British India government, remarked in 1811, that the Indians controlled the best part of the trade<sup>24</sup>. As the Indian population increased, they opened small shops selling staples, spices and sundries. Zanzibar turned out to be the gateway to the interior of Eastern Africa and acted as a broker between the industrializing western economies and the African interior. The increase in the Omani involvement in the Indian Ocean trade had given way to the emergence of an Omani merchant trading class. This class began investment in the production of dates using slave labor. The French demand for slaves for their sugar colonies in the Mascarenes and America also played a role in the development of the slave trade of Zanzibar. Clove plantations also provided an impetus in the growth of Zanzibar. While this was taking place in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Indian traders profited by providing financial and trade services. Ivory was the other commodity that provided a boost and caused an economic transformation in Zanzibar. As a result, Zanzibar was integrated into the world economy and ships from all over started coming to Zanzibar. The increase of trade also benefitted the few adventurous Indian and Ismaili businessman who had established their businesses. They, in turn, needed manpower and they seemed to be comfortable with obtaining people from Kachchh and Gujarat to help man their trading outposts in the interior. The Sultan of Zanzibar moved to centralize the foreign trade in the interior, from Eastern Zaire to the Tanganyika coast, through Zanzibar while extracting a profit at the coast.

The Sultan of Zanzibar had evolved into a Merchant Prince, especially since the British were providing all the critical defense services. He exacted a heavy tax at the coast. Foreign

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<sup>24</sup> Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (Oxford, UK: James Curry Ltd, 1987), 83

traders were not allowed to trade at the coast. Only local traders were allowed. The Sultan had devised a clever system of taxation that took advantage of arbitrage. Traffic further to the North and South were induced to move their traffic to the center by lower rates of taxation. The Zanzibar state revenues grew sevenfold in the first 70 years of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> According to Abdul Sheriff, he states that Indian financiers subverted the Sultanate by the indebtedness the Sultanate had incurred with the financiers, and the protection afforded to these financiers of British governance. It was in the middle of the nineteenth century that the Omani Kingdom could no longer rely on Britain to safeguard its integrity. It faced considerable pressure from the countries bordering Oman in the Middle East. At the same time, the scramble for Africa was beginning to take place. Eventually, this led to colonial rule over Zanzibar. British historians such as Coupland and Ingraham took the stance that all economic progress in East Africa was due to Sayyad Said who was the most prominent political figure at that time. Sayyad Said certainly pushed the cart of progress but many of the factors had already been laid in place.

Indians were quick to take advantage of this situation and it provided a tremendous impetus for them to move. I will focus on the Ismaili community in East Africa as they were the largest Asian minority in the twentieth century.

### **Ismailis in East Africa: A Short Background**

There have been Ismaili Muslims in East Africa since the sixteenth century. However, it was under the leadership of Aga Khan III (1885-1957) in the nineteenth century that the majority left the regions of Kutch, Sindh, Kathiawar and Gujarat in Northwest India. These Ismailis are

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<sup>25</sup> Abdul Sheriff. *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (Oxford, UK: James Curry Ltd, 1987), 2-3

known as Khojah and their ancestors were originally Hindus that had been converted by Ismaili pirs (missionaries) from Persia in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries

In the late 1800s, many Ismailis left India on the advice and encouragement of their religious leader Aga Khan III. In India, the Ismailis had been farmers, laborers and merchants and had left in search of better economic opportunities as traders and merchants in East Africa. It seems that they also left for many other reasons including famine, unemployment, religious persecution, and political instability. The first Ismailis arrived in Zanzibar and were encouraged to stay by the Sultan of Oman who ruled over the island at the time, and later by European colonialists that wanted to “stimulate economic development”. Many Asian settlers in East Africa worked for the Arabs, and later the British in different capacities, and their migration to Africa was linked to colonial political economies.<sup>26</sup>

Firoz briefly talks about his mother's family, at least what he can remember. He goes back to his grandfather and father, and I ask him why the Ismailis left India and why they never went back. He refers to *Sultan Mohammed Shah's (Aga Khan III) farman in which he advised Ismailis to: "Go to Africa. Burn the boards - we don't want one foot in India and the other in Kenya."*<sup>27</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, large scale migration to East Africa began partly because of trading opportunities presented by the importation of large numbers of indentured laborers from India to build the rail line from Mombasa, Kenya on the coast to Kampala, Uganda. Indians originating from the region of Gujarat from the provinces of Kachchh, Kathiawar and Sind (present day Pakistan) boarded “dhows” from the ports of Mandvi, Porbander and Diu and came

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<sup>26</sup> Aly Kassam-Remtulla, “History of the Khojah Ismailis” accessed March 1, 2019, <http://Ismaili.net/source/1121b/main.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



to Zanzibar, Mombasa, Tanga and points south in large numbers. Ismaili Muslims, together with other Indians, also migrated to East Africa.

The influence of the Aga Khans was unique to Ismailis. The other Indians did not move in large numbers unless they had been called by family members to join their businesses or help expand their business network. When the British opened opportunities for the railroad and other administrative positions, Indians applied for these jobs. Most of these indentured laborers returned to India. The Indians who came to settle became petty traders, shopkeepers and merchants.

Indian merchants were a vital factor in the economic development of East Africa. Before the nineteenth century, their presence and businesses were limited, yet already conspicuous. In the fifteenth century at Kilwa, some of the Indians were financiers, moneylenders or goldsmiths. Increasingly, the simultaneous growth in slave and ivory trades brought tremendous opportunities for them. Sailors carrying letters from East Africa would bring news from coastal towns from these Ismailis to their relatives. Additionally, another 'push' factor was wanting to better their lot and that was not difficult given that they were surrounded by famine, plague and British rule. And, an even greater push for Ismailis, was following the edicts (firmans) of the Aga Khans, the Imams of the Ismailis, whose word was considered law.

### **Sources and Methodology**

My sources come from archives, web articles and oral histories. To enable me to get a larger picture of Indian migration, I studied letters in the Marashtra State Archives (MSA)<sup>28</sup> in

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<sup>28</sup> I hired a graduate student of Dr. Goswami to go to the archives. She pulled all the material I have quoted that comes from the MSA, based on the areas of interest I had listed for her.

Bombay between the British Resident in Zanzibar and the British India government in Bombay. Additionally, these archives also yielded information on the plan by Britain to use indentured laborers in East Africa. I use these archives to give me data on the state of Gujarat's economy and weather. Since many of the Indian people to East Africa arrived from a culturally similar region of India, much of what applied to the Ismaili community is also applicable to the other Hindu and Muslim groups that migrated to East Africa. Indeed, these primary documents aid and strengthen my thesis.

Through my research, I answer the following questions and add to the historiography: *Which factors motivated certain Indian populations to migrate to East Africa? What role did Aga Khan the First, and especially Aga Khan the Third's edicts (firmans) influence their followers to migrate to move to East Africa? Which, if any, British colonial policies aided or hindered this migration? What was the influence of the Sultan of Oman and Muscat, and of the three Ismaili business entrepreneurs who became the richest Indians in East Africa in the nineteenth century?* All three of them called for Ismailis to migrate to East Africa to help expand their distribution networks into the interior.

Also, I examine Ismaili archives for edicts of the Aga Khans and oral histories, though much of these are anecdotal and based on oral histories or traditions and are held in secrecy. I am an Ismaili as well and have participated at some of the highest levels of the administrative structures of the Ismailis. Ismailis are generally secretive as they fear that certain enemies of the Ismailis will use Ismaili materials to try and banish Ismailis as Muslims. This has been tried in Pakistan several times but because the Government of Pakistan is favorably disposed to the Ismailis, it has not succeeded. I traveled to Toronto, Canada to interview several people during the summers of 2015 and 2016. I met with 4 people in Vancouver, Canada and 3 in Toronto,

including the founder and originator of *Khoja Wiki*.<sup>29</sup> I interviewed one aunt who is 95 years old and the wife of my uncle, Al-Noor Kassum, who was a prominent member of President Julius Nyerere's independence team for Tanganyika. My uncle has also written a memoir of his years titled *Africa's Winds of Change: Memoirs of an International Tanzanian*, in which there is an interesting chapter of my grandfather's early history. The interesting thing about these people was their ability to recall in a clear, articulate manner, the events of the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. They remembered their fathers and great grand-fathers' journey from India to East Africa. I asked them open-ended questions and then let them talk as I recorded their conversations with me. In 2017, I went to Vancouver, BC and Toronto and met with several Ismailis who managed to fill in some of the gaps and questions that inevitably developed.

### **Historiography**

There has been no attempt by Asian Indians, especially by those who migrated, to write down their history and that is purely because of the lack and level of education and literacy. The immigrants who settled in East Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were mostly petty traders and artisans interested in bettering their economic lot. Most of the general history has been written by British historians while it was only after independence from the British, that Indians began to talk about their oral history. Once substantial numbers moved in the second migration to Britain, Europe, Canada and the USA, the interest in putting down on paper their histories became somewhat of a priority. In the meantime, I will be relying on writings primarily by British historians as well as some oral histories. L.W. Hollingsworth

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<sup>29</sup> Iqbal Dewji is the creator of KhojaWiki.org – a site dedicated to family stories from East Africa of the Ismailis.

undertook a systematic review of the Asian community from the time of small trader settlements almost a thousand years old to the present time in his book *The Asians in East Africa*. Using both primary and secondary sources including Foreign and Colonial Office papers, the author has written a short historical survey of the largest non-African population of East Africa. There is one chapter devoted totally to the Ismaili Muslims, but it does not answer the questions at hand.

There are some general histories of East Africa such as the three volumes edited by Roland Oliver and Gervase Matthew called *History of East Africa*. This is a social, cultural and environmental history of East Africa. Though it's an excellent study, it does not detail Indian migration that would help me answer my questions. One important attribute of this book is that it is not a regurgitation of colonial history. Instead it uses geography and other disciplines to give us a broad view of the conditions of the period of study. The contributing authors are pre-historians, ethnographers and economists and the editors have taken steps to ensure that each article is contributing to advance East African history. This three-volume set presents a complete break from the traditional colonial histories which date back only to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is modern scholarship in the field of East African history, from pre-history to present times. In an area sadly lacking in written sources so vital to a conventional historian, this three-volume book is a starting point to create a contemporary account of an important area of human history. Sir John Gray, in his book, *History of Zanzibar from the Middle Ages to 1856* writes about the role of the Sultan of Oman and Muscat. Muscat was an important trading center for Indians and when the Sultan moved to Zanzibar permanently, he played an important role in promoting the migration of Indians. The book also details the East African slave trade which was important to the Sultan because he derived extensive revenues from it.

In the historiographical record, J.S. Mangat's *The History of the Asians in East Africa c. 1886 to 1945* specifically covers a major portion of the migration of Indians and it is a well written account based on extensive primary sources and archival material culled from the Colonial and India Government (British) archives in India, Great Britain and East Africa. It redresses the lack of an Asian Indian perspective and provides a detailed study of Asian Indian involvement in the development of East Africa. Several studies of seafaring in the Arabian Gulf and Oman by Dionisius A. Agius give a picture of the people who manned the dhows and plied the ocean. Additionally, these give us the techniques and the types of dhows that are built in India and the Gulf coast which allow us to peer into the journeys of the migrants. I also found an unusual eighteenth-century Gujarati manuscript that includes a grid-line map of Gujarat sailing directions and a list of Indian Ocean ports. It allows us to learn about the history of Indian cartography and navigation.

Cynthia Salvadori's three volume work *We came in Dhows* is a compilation of oral histories and stories from Indians in East Africa and they are quite enlightening in giving us a picture of migration. Some of the stories detail the actual voyages, conditions on board, conditions of the ocean and getting lost for days on the open ocean. Gijsbert Oonk in *Settled Strangers, Asian business elites in East Africa (1800-2000)*, relying primarily on oral interviews gives us a multi-disciplinary approach to his work. In his opinion, to understand human migration, a deep understanding of history, anthropology, economics, sociology and political science are required.

As far as the Ismailis are concerned, I will be relying on a monumental work by Dr. Farhad Daftary titled *The Ismailis: Their history and Doctrines*. Additionally, *The Memoirs of The Aga Khan* by Aga Khan III, the 48<sup>th</sup> Imam of the Ismailis, fill in that part of the history

relevant to the early history of the Ismailis. Teena Purohit's *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 2012. is another interesting book. Her book describes the Ismaili Community in British colonial India and focuses on a court case in 1866 where several followers of the religion sued the Imam, Aga Khan 1, to stop paying tithe to him. These disgruntled followers left Ismailism and became part of the Ithnasheri.

Copies of Primary documents were obtained from the records of the Marashtra State Archives in Bombay.

### **Chapter Outlines**

Chapter 1 and 2 detail the political and geographical environment of Kachchh and East Africa. Chapters 3 and 4 detail Ismaili history and the results of the oral conversations. Each chapter builds on the previous one. I am attempting to show how the edicts of the Aga Khans was so critical for the Ismailis.

European powers were in full acceleration to find fuel for their economic engines. A haphazard collection of overseas territories led to conflict and paranoia among the primary powers, Britain, France and Germany. Due to a long, economic depression that started in 1873, Africa was eyed covetously by the Europeans as a panacea that would help them cover their balance of trade deficits. East Africa could not escape the Europeans. Initially, the great European powers were taken aback by King Leopold of Belgium's unscrupulous exploitation of the Congo Free State and not wanting him to gain undue advantage, they decided to hold a conference in Berlin in 1884 to divide Africa into spheres of influence. Britain was under political pressure to secure lucrative markets.

It was within this environment that Britain and Germany, under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck, decided to hold a conference in Berlin in 1884 which concluded with the rules of engagement for securing territory in Africa by the various European powers. The map of Africa was divided into spheres of influence for the specific European powers. Britain's main aim was to have a swath of territory from the Suez to South Africa, but Germany took Tanganyika and thus undercut the British strategic plan. Germany, in fact, requested Britain to allow Indians, who were British subjects in India, to come to Tanganyika as indentured laborers.

Small numbers of traders who came in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were now replaced by a wave of indentured laborers to build the railroad and were soon followed by small shopkeepers and traders. This laid the framework for migration from the Indian subcontinent as family members and then members of the general population began to follow the news that economic prospects were better on the East African coast.

In his book *Africa's Winds of Change: Memoirs of an International Tanzanian*, Al Noor Kassum writes an interesting chapter of my grandfather's early history. I still recall the festive times at my grandfather's house when Aga Khan III, as did Aga Khan IV, would stay there when visiting his followers in Tanganyika. It is here that I personally saw the obedience of Ismailis in front of the Aga Khan. The interesting thing about the seniors in our community was their ability to recall in a clear, articulate manner, the events of the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. They remembered their fathers, grand-fathers and great grand-fathers' journey from India to East Africa. I asked them questions which were open-ended and then let them talk as I recorded their conversations with me. In 2017, In my interviews in Vancouver, BC and Toronto, I met with several Ismailis who managed to fill in some of the gaps and questions that inevitably developed.

## CHAPTER TWO: ENVIRONMENT AND MIGRATION CONDITIONS

As I describe the environment and conditions of migration, the factors mentioned in the previous chapter that led to the migration become apparent. The ocean environment played a major role as did the various famines that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. British imperial policies combined with weather and drought contributions also played a major role in pushing Ismailis out of Kachchh. The primary role played by the Aga Khans and the Imam of Muscat added the impetus to push Ismailis to the east coast of Africa. Kachchhis were traders and this chapter attempts to show the activity prior to the major migration move at the end of the Nineteenth Century.

### The Indian Ocean Environment

The Indian Ocean has a track record of creating societies and intercourse between states and these factors have played a major role in the development of trade and the subsequent migrations that followed. Ravi Palat writes about this in his essay “*Maritime Trade, Political Relations and Residential Diplomacy in the World of the Indian Ocean*”<sup>30</sup>. The connections created by the Indian Ocean and the Monsoon winds made the Indian Ocean a hotbed of trade and it was not just in the Western Ocean. It extended east all the way to Melaka in the eastern Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean permitted “traders, scholars, jurists, officials and military officers to move between several jurisdictions to seek employment and fortunes”<sup>31</sup>. Abdul Sheriff and Enseng Ho take a Braudelian look at the Indian Ocean in their book and it gives a

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<sup>30</sup> Ravi Palat, “Maritime Trade, Political Relations and Residential Diplomacy in the World of the Indian Ocean” in *The Indian Ocean – Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies*, Eds. Abdul Sheriff and Enseng Ho (London: Hurst & Co.,2014), 45

<sup>31</sup> Sheriff, Abdul, *The Indian Ocean – Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies*, Eds. Abdul Sheriff and Enseng Ho (London: Hurst & Co.,2014), 3



contextual environment to the specific swath of time when most Indians migrated to Eastern Africa. The Indian Ocean is surrounded by some of the most populous nations as well as some of the most advanced civilizations of the world, allowing for a tremendous opportunity to exploit its resources for the advancement of the people living around it.

The geographical factors, especially the influence of the North East Monsoons, as pointed out by William Kirk in his article<sup>32</sup>, is one of the most critical natural phenomena which enhanced, and enabled, communication between different parts of the Indian Ocean communities. The N.E. monsoon was favored by indigenous seamen as it provided for calmer seas and enabled small craft to navigate the ocean.<sup>33</sup> The Monsoons blow northeast from January for six months and southwest from July. This regularity allows sailing vessels to time their journeys so that they can go in one direction and later come back home at a different time. This facilitated trade and communication to a certain degree in the age before the advent of the steamers and aviation. Waiting for a change in the winds led to the dhows being forced to spend a fixed time in port. This led to many social consequences. As sailors of different nationalities made homes for a reasonably substantial period, they also created families of mixed race as well. Kirk also identified three discrete but complementary ecological zones around the Indian Ocean that encouraged trade and communication across the various communities around the ocean.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> William Kirk, "The N.E. Monsoon and Some Aspects of African History" *The Journal of African History*, Vol.3., no.2, Third Conference on African History and Archaeology; School of Oriental and African Studies, Univ. of London, 3-7 July 1961, (1962), pp. 263-267

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 265

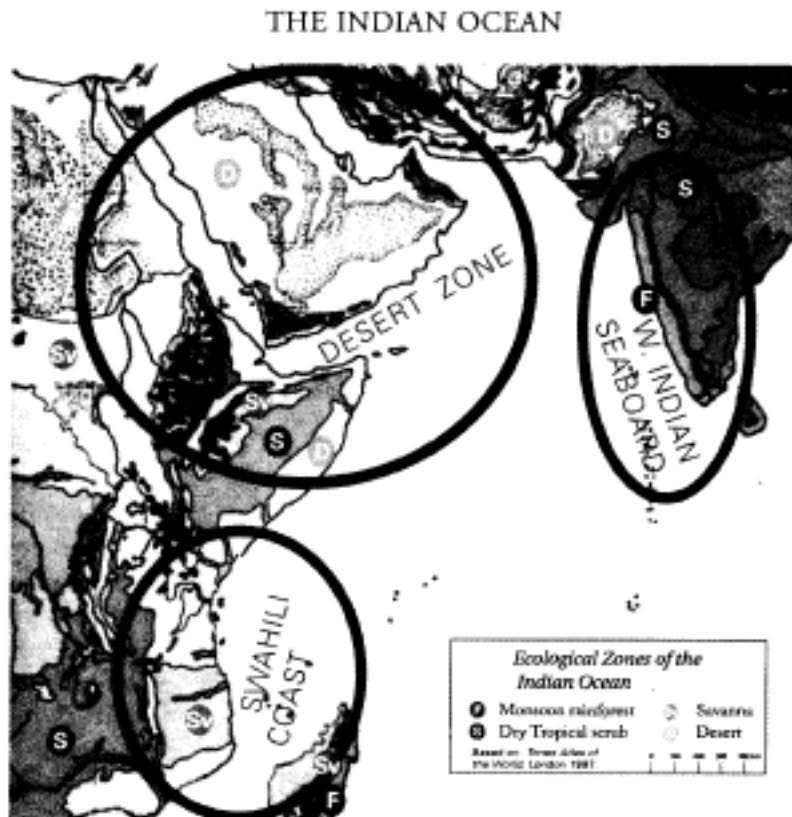


Figure 1: The Indian Ocean Environment<sup>35</sup>

According to Sheriff, trade was the main reason for the movement of people in the Indian Ocean.<sup>36</sup> Ismailis from Kachchh were known to have traded, though not settled, in East Africa. He quotes the Dutch sociologist, Van Leur, who had argued “that the Indian Ocean had undergone very little change for at least two thousand years and was dominated by peddlers who travelled with their luxury goods, buying and selling as they went.”<sup>37</sup> This description could

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 16

<sup>36</sup> Sheriff, Abdul, *The Indian Ocean – Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies*, Eds. Abdul Sheriff and Enseng Ho (London: Hurst & Co.,2014), 19

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 20

easily be applied to settlers who came to the East African coast in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The free trade and free movement in the Indian Ocean underwent a sea-change when the Europeans came to the Indian Ocean. Beginning with the “Vasco Da Gama Epoch”<sup>38</sup> that heralded the start of the colonization of the Indian Ocean, the age of free movement and trade ended as the European powers vied for supremacy.

While the dhows maintained their schedules on the Monsoon in the Indian Ocean, so did the caravans that went into the interior. This knowledge was crucial to the early Kachchh traders, who, when coming to East Africa, set up shop or worked with their relatives in Zanzibar and Bagamoyo, as well as setting up and financing the caravans which were going inland to obtain ivory and slaves. This enabled them to maintain tight turnaround times from East Africa back to Kachchh. Between the sailors, the caravan porters and owners and the financiers was a veritable circle of production and consumption. In East Africa, all the players were also cognizant of the cultures of the primary tribe dominant in the caravan system, the Nyamwezi<sup>39</sup> as well as the Swahili. It was the caravan towns that attracted the early Indian settlers. They were able to obtain goods either in the form of ninety to one hundred twenty-day credit or as commission agents for their principals in Zanzibar. Since they were likely to be relatives, they were trusted with the goods and the receiver risked their reputation in their home towns in Kachchh in the event they did not pay the merchant who had loaned them the goods.

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<sup>38</sup> Ravi Palat, “Maritime Trade, Political Relations and Residential Diplomacy in the World of the Indian Ocean” in *The Indian Ocean – Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies*, Eds. Abdul Sheriff and Enseng Ho (London: Hurst & Co.,2014), 46

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 96

## Kachchh

The northern west region of India bordering Pakistan is called Kachchh. It is Part of the Province of Gujarat and possesses some unique physical features that provide limited options for the people of Kachchh and, in fact, forced them to look outward to the sea. Kachchh is bordered by the Rann of Kachchh on both its western border and eastern border and by the Gulf of Kachchh and the Indian Ocean on its south. Kachchi sailors were considered as good as any and their boats connected Kachchh to Muscat and Aden. In his memorandum written in 1854 as a report on Kachchh, Lieutenant S.N. Raikes gave a breakdown of the population of Kachchh.<sup>40</sup> Table 2 describes the class and estimated population of Kachchh in 1852-53.

Table 2: Kachchh Population 1852-53

Class	Population
<b>Hindoos</b>	
Jarejas	8598
Waghela Rajpoots	817
Other Rajpoots	29,736
Brahmins and Banians*	40,384
Cultivators, Dirjees (tailors), Moochees (cobblers), silversmiths, and others of the Hindoo persuasion	220,885
Total	300,420
<b>Mahomedans</b>	
Mehmons, Kojas, Boras, etc.	74,581**
Artisans, Dyers, barbers, musicians, etc.	27,671
Halipotra, Raseepotra, Samma, and other nomadic tribes	3,965
Fukeers	2,885
Total	109,102
Grand Total	409,522 <sup>41</sup>

\*Members of these castes are almost the only people capable of reading and writing; and nearly all the officers of the executive are selected from these classes, while mercantile transactions are chiefly carried on by them.

\*\*Kojas includes the Ismailis

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<sup>40</sup> Raikes, S.N. Lieutenant, Memoir of the Kutch State, submitted to Government in November 1854, Marashtra State Archives *Bombay Government Records No. XV, 03-2215*, 85-86.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Kachchh had two religions – Hinduism, followed by two-thirds of the population and Islam, the remainder. The languages spoken were Kachchi and Gujarati. Gujarati was the official language of the government and the Province. Kachchh was generally barren land and grain had to be imported from Gujarat, Malabar and Sindh. There was a perennial shortage of water and there was no presence of a navigable river. Rivers were high when there was rain, but these dried up when the rains stopped. The lack of water was a major hindrance for Kachchh and made life difficult for its pastoral inhabitants. Water flowing north was so salty that even cattle would not drink it. Wells had to be dug close to thirty feet to reach potable water. The soil of Kachchh was not productive for agriculture. This made trading a principal line of endeavor and source of livelihood for Kachchis. The long coastline and its ports made oceanic trading a major activity as it linked Kachchh ports with Muscat, Aden and Zanzibar.<sup>42</sup> Mandvi, an important port in Kachchh, became prosperous because of these overseas connections. Mandvi was built by the first Rao in the sixteenth century and this would be a prescient move in the later centuries when Mandvi would become even more important.

Mandvi was a critical ingress and egress port for Kachchh. It was a survival port for Kachchh because it provided the local government with customs revenues at a time when its sources of revenue had fallen off due to famines and lack of rainfall. Many East African Indians claimed to have come, via dhows, from this port. People who had relatives living in East Africa would wait for the arrival of the returning dhows for letters and news of their relatives. It would be many months before they would learn about their relatives. It was under the control of the

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<sup>42</sup> Chayya Goswami, *The Call of the Sea – Kachchi traders in Muscat and Zanzibar, c. 1800-1880* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 15-19

monsoons. The seamen from Kachchh were experts and their reputations were well known. In fact, according to research in the twentieth century, it was a Kachchi pilot from Malindi who showed Vasco De Gama the way to India.

On October 3, 2010, historians and scholars gathered at Gujarat's port town, Mandvi, and discussed how a Kachchhi sailor, Kanji Malam, guided Vasco De Gama to Calicut from Malindi on the east African coast. Malam hailed from Mandvi, a ship-building hub, where a three-day maritime conference 'Gujarat and the Sea' was held. Scholars and research institutes from France, Portugal, China, Singapore and Sri Lanka took part in the event. When Gama arrived at Malindi, Gama's crew roped in a pilot (Malam) who could guide the expedition to Calicut and India.<sup>43</sup>

Cynthia Salvadori, in her excellent three volume book “We came in Dhows”, has compiled many stories and family recollections of people living in East Africa who came to East Africa in Dhows. In one such story related by the Kana brothers Yakub Abbas Kana and Issak Abbas Kana of Mombasa, who were Badalas, she recounts the following story:

You want to know the first member of our family to be in Africa and when? Well, his name was Mohamed, and he was known as ‘Kana Maalim’. That name means “Master of the Tiller”, because in the language of Gujarbhadalat, which is where we Badalas are from, the word for tiller, or rudder, is ‘sukhan’. He was the who showed Vasco De Gama the way from Malindi to India.<sup>44</sup>

Along the coast of Kachchh, resides a community of seafarers known as Badalas. Badalas are a community of seamen and their families and eventually, in East Africa they reinvented themselves to trading and seafaring.

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<sup>43</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/Gujarati-showed-Vasco-da-way/articleshow/6674395.cms> accessed January 18, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Salvadori, Cynthia, *We came in Dhows* (Nairobi: Paperchase Kenya Ltd., 1996) 1:4.

Many of the Hindu traders were Lohanas and Bhatias, while the Muslims were either Shia or Sunni; Shias were divided into Bohra, Aga Khani Khojas (Ismailis) and Ithnasheri Khojas. The Sunnis were primarily Kachchhi memons. All these groups had a shared migratory experience going back a thousand years when they came down from the north along the Indus river and settled in Kachchh. Most became agriculturists until they moved to the coast where they became traders. They shared many cultural beliefs and practices.<sup>45</sup> Trade was rising in the Indian Ocean and, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was in the hands of the Muscati Arabs as well as the Arabs that had settled a long time ago at the coast in and around Mombasa and Malindi. A prominent family in business at the coast were the Mazruis whose descendant, Professor Ali Mazrui of Public Broadcasting Service, would become well-known as the author of “The Africans”. He was a prolific author and teacher.<sup>46</sup> These merchants were able to tap their ivory resources and trade with India and Arabia. Muscat was the pivot point and dhows coming from the east would make port there before going south to the East Africa coast bringing brass wire which was an important commodity for the Kamba tribe of Kenya<sup>47</sup>. The end of Anglo-French warfare meant the loss of advantage for the Omanis as their trade in slaves ended. It was the vacuum created by the end of the war that allowed Indian merchants to increase their Ivory trade. By 1811, there were already a few adventurous Kachchis and Sindhis<sup>48</sup> settled in Zanzibar and they were the beginning of the nucleus that would allow many of their family and friends to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>46</sup> Douglas Martin, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/22/us/ali-mazrui-scholar-of-africa-who-divided-us-audiences-dies-at-81.html> accessed January 20, 2018

<sup>47</sup> Sheriff, Abdul, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (Oxford, UK: James Curry Ltd, 1987), 83

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.,84

follow them throughout the nineteenth century, either as workers in their enterprises or to become part of the much-needed distribution network for the opening of the interior.

In the meanwhile, there was a lot of strife between the different clans in Kachchh and one of the leaders of the Hansraj clan called on the British in 1802 for intervention on his behalf. This was the start of British influence in Kachchh affairs. The British, who had already been alarmed by the activities of pirates from Kathiawar who had made trade between Bombay, Gujarat, Sindh and Kachchh quite difficult, sent a naval force to attack the pirates at their bases. Kachchh also came into focus for the British because of its ever-growing share of the cotton trade. The British did not wish to have to deal with the dissension in Kachchh as it impacted their trade with the China market. The British eyed Kachchh as a military post to deal with Sindh and Afghanistan and to limit the influence of the French and Americans in Kachchh.<sup>49</sup>

Despite its successes in overseas trade, the revenues coming into the Kachchh treasury was not adequate to launch any public works programs nor create an emergency fund for some sort of a support system in the event of natural calamities. The people of Kachchh lived a meager hand-to-mouth existence. Most times, the revenue was spent on military maintenances and for defense spending against pirates and bandits. Kachchh also suffered some geological changes when several Kachchhi tribes constructed dams on the *Indus* and diverted the river, thus depriving the irrigation of cultivated land. To add to this, a severe earthquake shook Kachchh in June 1819 which levelled large parts of Kachchh and killed several thousand people. It seems

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<sup>49</sup> Chayya Goswami, *The Call of the Sea – Kachchi traders in Muscat and Zanzibar, c. 1800-1880* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 22



that, combined with all the natural disasters, the lack of rainfall and the internal political situation of Kachchh, the only way to survive for Kachchhis was to “relocate their destinies”<sup>50</sup>

### **Famines**

Famines were a major push factor for Ismailis migrating to East Africa. The constant threat of famines created tremendous insecurity to a pastoral society. A major famine took place in 1802, having been preceded by one in 1791 called the Skull famine. Between the famines, cholera and plague, as well as political instability, Kachchhis started moving out, firstly to the south to Bombay and then to East Africa. As each famine cycle came, the intensity of migration increased, and the effects were tremendous. Chayya Goswami writes, “In 1823, the rains failed again, thousands of cattle died, and villages were deserted. One-fifth of Kachchh’s population is said to have left the state.”<sup>51</sup> The worst famine was known as *Chappanyo*.

Together with the British aversion to interfering in the mechanism of the markets, and the fear that any help rendered to the Indian peasant would evolve into a long-term welfare maintenance system, Lord Lytton, Queen Victoria’s viceroy, led India to adhere to policies which would exacerbate the suffering of the poor. The Famine Commission of 1878-1880 were further hampered by the Commission’s report that supported Lytton and his skinflint reasoning: “The doctrine that in time of famine the poor are entitled to such relief at all times, and thus the foundation would be laid of a system of general poor relief, which we cannot contemplate

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 59

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 61

without serious apprehension...”<sup>52</sup> Gujarat was particularly hard hit. El Nino had been particularly tough on Gujarat and Kachchh. The rains never came. The drought persisted until 1902.<sup>53</sup> A dual calamity was that the price of cotton and cane sugar were depressed, and this hit the Gujarat agricultural economy hard. To add to this, Gujarat was hit by a plague of locusts and rats. Gujaratis who survived on a dairy diet, were horrified to see their cattle die and their lands become infertile. Famine brought cholera and plague. Several hospitals reported 90 percent mortality.<sup>54</sup>

The British did nothing. Dr. Klopsch, of *The Christian Herald*, an expert at famine relief expeditions to Russia, Armenia and Cuba, was “appalled at the shocking conditions nonchalantly tolerated by British officials.”<sup>55</sup> Major towns lost a third of their populations. This holocaust obviously had an impact on the “tightly woven fabrics of family and religious life”.<sup>56</sup> According to published sources, tribal people felt the major impact of this destruction. In the meantime, British authorities rated ethnicities like cattle and displayed their contempt against the brown man. When asked to explain why mortality in Gujarat was so high, the district officer wrote in his report:

The Gujurati is a soft man, unused to privation, accustomed to earn his good food easily. In the hot weather he seldom worked at all and at no time did he form the habit of

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<sup>52</sup>Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts – El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), 33

Chayya Goswami, *The Call of the Sea – Kachchi traders in Muscat and Zanzibar, c. 1800-1880* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 81

<sup>53</sup> Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts – El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), 170

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

continuous labour. Large classes are believed by close observers to be constitutionally incapable of it. Very many even among the poorest had never taken a tool in hand in their lives. They lived by watching cattle and crops, by sitting in the fields to weed, by picking cotton, grain and fruit, and, as Mr. Gibb says, by pilfering.<sup>57</sup>

The British were displaying a horrific sense of their interpretation of what was civilized behavior. They added to the burden of the Gujaratis by collecting on their taxes as well during this harsh period. Vaughn Nash, in letters to the *Manchester Guardian*, wrote that the British authorities announced that “*The revenue must at all costs be gathered in*”, a decision Nash described as “picking the bones of the people.”<sup>58</sup> If the farmers decided to withhold payment, the British simply confiscated their land. “The India Office, not counting malaria deaths, estimated famine mortality in British India 1899-1900 as 1.25 million, but Indian economists claimed that it was actually three or four times this.”<sup>59</sup> In Gujarat the toll was closer to a sixth of the population, if not more. It was the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century that showed the greatest number of migrants to the east coast of Africa, having heard of the lush, fertile African grasslands. Famines were without a doubt a major incentive to move. For Ismailis, having their Imam exhorting them to move, would no doubt mean that divine providence was guiding them out of “Egypt” and on to the promised land. The next table, table 3, gives a timeline of the historical record of the various famines.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.,172

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.,173

Table 3: Historical Record of Drought Famines in Gujarat <sup>60</sup>

<b>Dates 1800 - 1947</b>	<b>Location</b>
1897-1898	Gujarat
1899-1900	Kutch and Gujarat
1911, 1921, 1926	Gujarat Saurashtra
1935, 1938	Gujarat
1939-1940	Gujarat and Saurashtra
1940-1941	Kutch and Gujarat
1946-1947	Kutch and Panchmahal

### **Muscat**

Indians tried to accommodate this untenable situation and did so by migrating to Zanzibar and points west. Trade with Muscat had become a major activity for Kachchh and the Sultan of Muscat and Oman was very pleased to participate in this trade. In the early nineteenth century, he welcomed the Kachchhis and Gujaratis to settle in Muscat and provide him with the monetary instruments as well as their know-how of international trade. The Portuguese had lowered their activity level in the Indian ocean in the face of increased competition from the British and the French and had limited themselves to the area of Goa in Western India. Sultan Seyyid Said, being an astute businessman, jumped on the British ship of influence and protection. The British naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean allowed this favored position. Indian traders welcomed the opportunity and Kachchhi businessmen also established major connections with Muscat. Muscat became a center for a major Indian trade presence. Not having to deal with famine and scanty rainfall, they were free to pursue entrepreneurial mobility to seek their fortunes. From the start of

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<sup>60</sup> <sup>60</sup> <https://www.scribd.com/doc/47713630/Records-of-the-Drought-Famines-of-GUJARAT-Since-Last-616-Years-Earliest-since-1936>

the nineteenth century, trade between Muscat and Kachchh grew rapidly. This connection would play an important role in the migration of Kachchhis to East Africa. The Iranian civil wars had led to the decline of the three major ports in the Persian Gulf.<sup>61</sup> Muscat had become the major transshipment port between the Persian Gulf, Aden and India. As Muscat expanded its empire to the Zanzibar coast, the Indian traders, who were also known as Baniyas, moved to Zanzibar with them.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the triad trade network of Kachchh, Muscat and Zanzibar was born, and their economic fortunes were connected for the next 100 years.

Abdul Sheriff calls it the “Commercial Expansion and the Rise of the Merchant Class”. With the winding down of the export of slaves at the start of the nineteenth century, the Omanis in Zanzibar had become plantation owners and they still needed slaves from the interior to run their clove and other slave produced commodities. But the biggest boost came from the development of the ivory trade. The ivory trade had collapsed in Mozambique and this created a gap in the ivory trade to India. Zanzibar became a critical port for the export of ivory.<sup>63</sup> This trade was monopolized by Indian merchants. Mozambique collapsed because the authorities attempted to break the hold of Indian merchants. Combined with the Anglo-French naval warfare taking place in the Indian Ocean, this led to the destruction of Portuguese shipping, and there was no recovery of the ivory trade for Mozambique. Oman remained neutral and Indian ships rushed to Muscat. Oman remained neutral and Indian ships were anxious to get flagged by the Omanis as the British could not offer them any protection. Zanzibar boomed as ivory prices rose.

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<sup>61</sup> Chayya Goswami, *The Call of the Sea – Kachchi traders in Muscat and Zanzibar, c. 1800-1880* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 79-80

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 82

<sup>63</sup> Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (Oxford, UK: James Curry Ltd, 1987), 79

Indians became pivotal in trade in Zanzibar and between Zanzibar and India primarily through Kachchh. Dr. Sheriff has written that this dominance of trade by Indians was affected by a couple of structural weaknesses.<sup>64</sup> The famines had a direct effect on the production of cotton goods and on purchasing power. With ivory being a luxury, purchasing power dropped. The 1813 famine killed nearly half the population of Kachchh<sup>65</sup> and forced many to migrate elsewhere. The second structural weakness, according to Sheriff, came about because of the subordinate relationship of India to British rule. Britain had found that there was a limited market among Indians for its manufactured goods mostly because of the quality of India's own manufactures. Britain resorted to prohibitive tariffs on Indian goods entering Britain while giving British goods coming into India a very nominal duty. This had the effect of "under developing" India and India was undermined and became a mere staging post.<sup>66</sup>

John Kirk, who was the Consul General in Zanzibar, believed that the destruction of the cotton manufacturing industry in India by the British, was the chief cause of increasing the migration of Indians to East Africa.<sup>67</sup> Impoverished Indians became conditioned to the thought of migration. Together with the conditions of Gujarat, the economic situation led them to get out and head west. Ismailis were caught up in this tide going west. Especially those from Kachchh, who were primarily agriculturists and petty traders, it was a matter of survival. It is to this mix that the Aga Khans played a critical role. In the next chapter, we will see how their position as the Imam and head of the Ismailis with almost mythical and divine powers, would push many of them out of India for a better life in east Africa. The groundwork had already been laid by some

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 84

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 85

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 86

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

major pioneers in the middle of the nineteenth century. Entrepreneurs who had already established major business operations, who had also developed political capital and shrewdly played the British at their own political game.

Cynthia Salvadori has written an interesting compilation of stories from Asians in East Africa. There are three volumes filled with stories of East Africa, from sailors who plied the Indian Ocean to settlers who tell us of the frightening times on the railroad route with lions roaring nearby. Volume I is centered around on the journeys from India to Africa. Cynthia Salvadori writes about the Kana family, reputed to have shown Vasco da Gama the sea route to India. In the interview, his descendants said:

You want to know about the first member of our family to be in Africa and when? Well, his name was Mohamed, and he was known as ‘Kana Maalim’. That name means ‘Master of the Tiller’, because in the language of Gujarat, which is where we Badalas are from, the word tiller or rudder is ‘sukhan’ He was the pilot that showed Vasco da Gama the way from Malindi to India. That was a very long time ago.

How was Kana Maalim related to us? Well, he was a Badala like us. We are a Muslim community and our traditional work is sailing ships. Our ancestors sailed the dhows. They sailed without compasses, just by the sun and the stars. They would come from India to Africa when the winds were right, and then go back again when the winds changed. Kana Maalim happened to be in Malindi when Vasco da Gama came with his ships [1498] but he wasn’t settled there.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Cynthia Salvadori, *We came in Dhows* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paperchase Kenya Ltd., 1996), 4.

In The Dhows of Cutch Mandvi –

From interviews with Yakub Abbas Kana and Isaak Abbas Kana in Mombasa

We Badalas<sup>69</sup> are seafarers. We came from Cutch Mandvi to Africa as nakhodas and crews for the chows and we brought all the other communities over in our dhows. Of course, we didn't come only to Africa: we were going all over, to ports like Mangalore, Calicut and Singapore.

The dhows of Cutch Mandvi were not all owned by us, but a few of them were. The rest were owned by Bhatias, most of them. These Bhatias are Hindus, businessmen, and nowadays they are here as owners of spare parts shops in Kenya and Tanzania. All of the Bhatias here are from Cutch Mandvi, and we Badalas brought them here in former days. Years ago, we brought even the Bohras and the Ithnasheris, the Memons and the Khojas, every community in the old days.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Badalas tribe are a group of sea going people who specialized in taking people from the west coast of India to East Africa and back.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 5



### CHAPTER THREE: THE ISMAILIS AND OTHER INDIAN COMMUNITIES

One of the most famous early Ismaili settlers were the family of Walji Hirji. Rahimtulla Abdulla Rahimtulla recounted this story to Cynthia Salvadori who published it in “*We Came in Dhows*”.

I would like to write about my family not because it is one of the oldest and wealthiest Indian families in Kenya but because it is unique in that both my grandfather and my uncle left most of their fortunes to benefit the less fortunate members of the community.

Our family did not start rich. When my great-grandfather Waljee Hirji arrived by dhow nearly a century and a half ago he was probably penniless. He was a Khoja Ismaili from Jamkhambhalia, a small town in Kathiawar, but times must have been hard there because he and his brother left home to go to Zanzibar where there was an established Ismaili community there. They must have been very young and working for some other Ismaili there. They no doubt made contacts in Mombasa where there must have been other Indians trading. In 1867 my great-grandfather moved up to Mombasa to go into business for himself.

My great-grandfather opened a small shop close to the old harbor and dealt in general merchandise, I suppose whatever he could buy and sell....

– Rahimtulla Abdulla Rahimtulla, a descendant of the founder of the Rahimtulla Trust:

Ismaili history begins in the sixth Century when Islam was established by Prophet Muhammad. Ismailis are the second largest Shi’i community, the first being the Twelvers whose largest numbers reside in Iran.<sup>71</sup> Because of their history of being persecuted by the Sunnis, Ismailis travelled and migrated wherever safety was available. When the prophet died, there was dissension among his followers as to who would lead the religion. The argument laid out by the followers for Ali, the Prophet’s nephew, was that it should be the nearest relative of the Prophet. Ali had married the Prophet’s daughter and was also his cousin. Ismailis supported Ali’s

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<sup>71</sup> Daftary, Farhad, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), xv

ascension and they also believe that the Aga Khans are the direct descendants and heirs to the leadership of Islam. It is the followers of Ali who constitute the Shia. The Sunnis are those that followed the temporal leadership of Abu Bakr, the Prophet's uncle, who became Caliph after the Prophet's death. Ismailis, under the leadership of their Imams, founded the first Shi'i caliphate under the Fatimid caliph. A catastrophic situation which threatened to wipe out the Ismailis and their Imam took place when Helugu ransacked the Ismaili stronghold of Alamut. However, the Ismailis survived and lived as a minority Muslim sect in many countries in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

Ismailis have faced intense hostility in many Muslim countries and are not allowed to practice in deep Sunni states like Saudi Arabia. Anti-Ismaili historians have painted large swathes of Ismailis as followers of the "Old Man in the Mountain" who is supposed to have drugged his followers and made them assassins.<sup>72</sup> Modern scholarship, together with the recovery of Ismaili manuscripts preserved in India, debunk, what are to Ismailis, slanderous stains on their reputation. An example of such a tainted view is by reading the accounts of Ata-Malik Juwayni's account of the invasion of Sunni lands by the Mongol conquest. While Baghdad was destroyed, and its caliph murdered, Juwayni seemed to write with relish on the Mongols obliterating the Shia Ismaili mini state of Alamut in the remotest reaches of the Alburz mountains. Genghis Khan had ordered the Ismailis to be annihilated - "None of that people should be spared, not even the babe in its cradle"<sup>73</sup> Yet, Dr. Shafique Virani has shown in *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages* that not only did Ismailis survive, but so did the line of Imamat. The Imams settled in Persia and from

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., xvi

<sup>73</sup> Shafique N. Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages – A History of Survival, A search for Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4

their settlements, sent out Dais (missionaries) and received delegations from Ismaili settlements. It is through these visits and messages sent that the Imams guided the Ismailis. The Imams were also able to collect tithe and manage their followers by giving instructions to the visitors.

Alamut fell in or around 1256 A.D. Prior to the fall of Alamut, dais (missionaries) were sent eastwards towards the Indian subcontinent.<sup>74</sup> One such dai, Pir Sadardin, was extremely successful and converted large numbers of the local Hindus from the Lohana caste<sup>75</sup> in the 13th century in Kachchh. He gave them the name of Khwaja which subsequently became Khoja. Sadardin built the first Nizari mosque called Jamatkhana, which is another word for assembly and prayer Hall. His primary strategy was to fuse Hindu legends, and to find equivalents in the Quran to convince the Lohanas that the only true religion was really Ismailism. The primary vehicle used to preach and convert were the *Ginans*. Ginans are devotional hymns The Imam was presented as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu.

This strategy enabled Pir Sadardin to convert large numbers of the lower caste Hindus, primarily from the Lohana caste. It was the descendants of these Ismailis who travelled to the East African coast, initially to trade. They developed trade networks with Muscat as a hub and middle point as well as work with the Sultan of Muscat whose hegemony included the Mombasa coastal area and most importantly, Zanzibar. From these humble beginnings, the Ismailis produced several highly successful entrepreneurs. One, Tharia Topan, was knighted twice for his later efforts to stop slavery and his services to the Crown. He, as well as several others, played an

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<sup>74</sup> Daftary, Farhad, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 478.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*,479

important role in outfitting and supplying caravans going into the interior. Stanley the explorer writes in 1871 in his book, “How I found Livingstone”:

One of the honestest among men, white, black, red or yellow, is a Mohammedan Hindi called Tarya Topan. Among the Europeans at Zanzibar, he has become a proverb for honesty, and strict business integrity. He is enormously wealthy, owns several ships and dhows, and is a prominent man in the councils of Seyd Burgash. (Sultan)<sup>76</sup>

Ismailis named these three Ismailis the “uncrowned Kings” of East Africa. Sir Tharia Topan (Zanzibar), Sewa Haji Paroo (Bagamoyo) and Alidina Visram (Uganda) who were all active in the mid to late nineteenth century. They established large distribution-oriented businesses that created tremendous wealth for them and were extremely well connected and influential with the Sultan of Zanzibar as well as British and German authorities.<sup>77</sup> Kassamali Paroo, was an Ismaili missionary, and he wrote an interesting paper on Ismaili settlement.<sup>78</sup> Historian Walter Brown found the following from old German and Zanzibari records:

During the first three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Ismailis gradually migrated from India to Zanzibar. By the commencement of the fourth decade, there were 165 Ismaili families including 26 married women in Zanzibar. In 1866, as shown on the following table, there were 2558 Ismailis residing at the following towns:

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<sup>76</sup> Henry M. Stanley, *How I Found Livingstone*, (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1891), 8. (Note: Tharia Topan is also the great, great, grandfather of my wife, Nafisa.)

<sup>77</sup> Kassamali Paroo, *Pioneering Ismaili Settlement in East Africa* (Private papers, January 1970) Obtained from family members in Orlando, FL 2017.

<sup>78</sup> He quotes a Professor Walter Brown, a University of Michigan professor, who had conducted research in pre-historic Bagamoyo, Tanganyika and Zanzibar.

Table 4: Ismaili Population in Zanzibar 1866

Location	Population
Zanzibar	2100
Pemba	57
Bagamoyo	139
Marima Villages	25
Dar-es-Salaam	43
Kilwa	176
Mungas	18
Total	2558 <sup>79</sup>

As stories of their successes and expansion reached the shores of Kachchh and Western India and as their requirement for employees and partners rose, people from their villages started migrating west to East Africa. According to Paroo, he writes in his paper that it was “quite true to say that many of our present prominent Ismailis in Kenya and Uganda, had their beginning in East Africa in the employment of Alidina Visram.”<sup>80</sup> Dr. John Kirk wrote to Sir Bartle Frere in his report, “Of all classes connected with the trade of East Africa, there is none more influential than the natives of India generally known as ‘Banians.’”<sup>81</sup> Within the same body of the report, he writes:

Most of them belong to four or five of the great trading classes of Western India. We met a few representatives of other castes – a few goldsmiths(sonars), tailors (Guzerati dargis), servants, such as cooks, washermen etc. and two bards (bhats), travelling separately, and testifying to the extent to which the love of African travel has of late years possessed some of the least moveable of Indian races. All these, however, were rare exceptions and

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>81</sup> Sir Bartle Frere regarding Indians memo to Lord Granville, Administration report Enclosure 1, No.51, 1873, MSA, Vol.V,

the Indians we met with were generally Bhattias, Lohana Wantias, Khojas, Mehmons or Bohras.<sup>82</sup>

The report goes on to define some characteristics of the immigrants. Frere mentions that the Khojas, mostly Ismailis, and Mehmons (another caste) were mostly occupied in foreign trade. He writes, “Khojas and Mehmons bear a similar character in Sind, Cutch and Kattywar.”<sup>83</sup> The history of the Khojas was investigated during the course of an interesting trial in the High Court of Bombay. Frere writes, “...the origin and tenets of the sect were traced with remarkable judicial precision by the counsel in discussing, and by Sir Joseph Arnold in deciding, on the claims of the Aga Khan to be the spiritual head of the sect and lineal representative of the “old man of the mountain.”<sup>84</sup> The impetus given by the Aga Khans to Ismailis to move to Zanzibar was a major factor for the Ismailis of Kachchh and Kathiawar. The religious leadership of the Aga Khans, Imams of the Nizari Ismailis, is like that of a pope, and this includes the power of infallibility. For Ismailis, it would be unthinkable to disobey him.<sup>85</sup> Many Ismailis, especially those from powerful families, even today, seek his guidance and then follow that guidance to the letter. Other Ismailis, who do not have the access the rich have, hear about the guidance in the Ismaili Jamatkhana (mosques) and then try to follow it as well.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.,101

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Dr. Sami Makarem *The Doctrine of the Ismailis* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research, 1972), Dr. Makarem quotes in the appendix the Ismailia Association Pakistan *Fundamentals of Ismaili Faith* line item 8; “That the obedience of the Imam of the time is a fundamental religious obligation on the Ismailis, and his disobedience is a paramount sin.”

## The Aga Khans

The following table shows the lineal descent of the Aga Khans.

Table 5: The Aga Khans<sup>86</sup>

Period of Imamate	Imam of the Time
1817-1881	Hasan Ali Shah, Aga Khan I
1881-1885	Aga Ali Shah, Aga Khan II
1885-1957	Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III
1957-Present	Karim Al-husseini, Aga Khan IV

### Aga Khan I and the British

Throughout their history, Ismailis have been affected by migrations. After Prophet Muhammad died, and Imam Ali (the Prophet's nephew and heir to the leadership of the Muslims) was subsequently murdered, the Umayyads and their supporters started persecuting Ali's supporters.<sup>87</sup>

Among the early Imams, Jafar-al-Sadiq, the fifth Imam, enunciated the doctrine of imamate and this became the guiding principle of Imamat in Ismailism.<sup>88</sup> He explained that there was an eternal need for "a divinely appointed and infallible guide to instruct mankind by means of his sapient knowledge."<sup>89</sup> This is what Ismailis believe and any word, religious or not, becomes law. This was the genesis of the Ismailis' history of migration and today, Ismailis are scattered over many countries. The Aga Khans, according to Ismaili beliefs, are the direct

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<sup>86</sup> Table created from Ismaili histories

<sup>87</sup>Shafique N. Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages – A History of Survival, A search for Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

descendants of Ali and therefore, carry the mantle of leadership passed to Ali by the Prophet at his death. Though there have been many splits within Ismailism, the most major one is at the twelfth Imam whose main adherents are in Persia. The most glorious period of Ismailism is the Fatimid period when Ismaili political success reached its peak and the Fatimid caliph and Imam of the Ismailis claimed dominion over most of North Africa, Egypt, Sicily and other areas of the middle east. However, there was no effort for mass conversion. These successes frightened their enemies, the Abbasids. When the Caliph and Imam al-Mustansir died in Cairo, there was a struggle between his two sons, Nizar and Mustali, and this resulted in the next big split. Hasan Bin Sabah, who had acquired Fort Alamut in Persia. Alamut became the headquarters of the Nizari Ismailis. Hasan was a brilliant strategist and spread the Nizaris among the many forts he had acquired to foil the Saljuqs who ruled with the blessings of the Abbasids, who were sworn enemies of the Ismailis. The Saljuqs were sworn enemies of the Ismailis. Hassan's strategy of spreading the Ismailis among these forts and using assassination spread terror in Saljuqs territory. An even greater enemy were the Mongols. The greatest collateral damage to their goal to wipe out the Ismailis was the burning of the great library at Alamut. A few books on the religion and copies of the Quran were all that were saved.

Helugu's historian, Juwayni, declared that all were killed, and no trace remained. This unverified claim became part of western scholarship and only began to change two hundred years ago. The few Ismailis who survived included the son and heir of the Imam of the time and it is through this line that the Aga Khans claim the mantle of Imamatus.



## *Aga Khan I*

He is a God—his income immense. He lets none of his sect kiss his hand under twenty rupees, and is the greatest rascal possible, that is, a clever brave man, but being a God makes a virtue of any sin he likes to commit. I speak truly when saying that his followers do not and dare not refuse him any favour he asks, wives, daughters, slaves, money, houses, furniture, are all his, and he doesn't let the privilege grow rusty. He could kill me if he pleased, he has only to say the word and one of his people would do the job in a twinkling and go straight to heaven for the same. He is too shrewd for that however, and they all have a great fear of me since the battles.

– Sir Charles Napier to Governor-General of India, Earl of Ellenborough, 1843<sup>90</sup>

As an Imam, the Aga Khan's word was law. Aga Khan I was a "larger than life" figure. He was born around Mahallat, in modern day Iran. Hasan Ali Shah, as he was known as, succeeded his father at the age of thirteen and was given the title of Aga Khan by Fateh Ali Shah, the Qajar emperor of Persia. The title of Aga Khan, meaning "Lord of the Chiefs", was the first time that this designation was given to the Imam of the Ismailis. There have been forty-nine Imams of the Ismailis. Only the last four have been accorded the honorific, Aga Khan. It is a hereditary title and will continue to the next Imam. Queen Elizabeth also bestowed on Aga Khan III and IV, the title of *His Highness*.

Aga Khan I was, also, the first Imam of the Ismailis to advise people to go to Zanzibar. Amirali Mamdani, in his family history *The Voyage of Destiny*, writes that:

Verbal evidence indicates that Ismaili Imams had advised the jamat (community) of Kachchh and Kathiawar to relocate. However, the severe famine known in history as

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<sup>90</sup> Purohit, Teena, *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India* (p. 18). (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA). 18 Kindle Edition

*Chapanio*, caused distress and farmers lost their livestock, land and thousands of Indians Died of starvation. Reviewing the circumstances, Hasan Ali Shah, Aga Khan I, advised the jamat (Community) to leave Kutch, Kathiawad and move to other regions of India and the Gulf states. However, it was Sultan Mohamed Shah, Aga Khan III, who gave specific advice to migrate, particularly to the eastern coast of Africa.<sup>91</sup>

The emperor of Persia gave Aga Khan I many material possessions and eventually gave him his daughter's hand in marriage. On the death of the Shah, Aga Khan I took up arms on behalf of the Shah's grandson. In so doing, he also acquired many enemies and one of them was the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister had supported one of his many minions who had the nerve to ask for the hand in marriage of Aga Khan I's daughter for his son. The Aga Khan I took it as an insult that this man of low birth would deign to want to marry the grand-daughter of Fath Ali Shah, Emperor of Persia.<sup>92</sup> This started hostilities between Aga Khan I and the supporters of Mirza Aghasi, the Prime Minister. Aga Khan I, with a cavalry of 150 horsemen, escaped to Afghanistan in 1841<sup>93</sup> where he sought the help of the British. It would be the beginning of a long and still ongoing relationship with the British Crown which would come in very useful in opening British East Africa for Ismailis. His services were not merely diplomatic. He took up arms for the British Flag and help subdue Sind for the British. For his help in Afghanistan and Sind, he received a pension from the British equivalent to that of an Indian prince.

Aga Khan I, Hasan Ali Shah, was the first Imam of the Ismailis who supported the move by small numbers of Ismailis, to go to East Africa and settle there, primarily, for a better economic future. The Ismailis of Sind, Kachchh, Kathiawar, Northern Pakistan were all

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<sup>91</sup> Mamdani, Amirali, *The Voyage of Destiny: From Jamnagar to New York* (Self-published: 2012), loc.741

<sup>92</sup> Daftary, Farhad, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 507

<sup>93</sup> Desai, Naoroji, *The Aga Khan and his Ancestors* (New Delhi: Readworthy Publications (P) Ltd. E-Book 2012), loc 481

primarily converts of Pir Sadardin in the fourteenth century. These Ismailis were called Khawaja or Khoja as they are now known as. They used to send small delegations to Persia to deliver the tithe and get messages and blessings from the Imam to take back to their congregations. It is at these kinds of meetings that the Imam would come to know of the conditions of his followers, including their economic wellbeing. He would get reports of famines<sup>94</sup> as well as any communal strife. Hasan Ali Shah (Aga Khan I) had entered Sind and became more involved in communal affairs of the local Ismaili community. Additionally, he was now on the payroll of the British and conducted several campaigns for them in Sind. The fact that he was now physically present in their neighborhood led to property conflicts. Hasan Ali Shah considered all communal property, including the mosques, belonging to him. Some of the Ismailis disputed that and it ended up in the hands of a British Judge, Justice Arnould. In 1866, the Bombay High Court agreed with Hasan Ali Shah that he was the Imam of the Shi'i Ismaili Muslim sect. His relationship with the British Crown started in 1841 when he met Major Henry Rawlinson<sup>95</sup> who was the British envoy in Kandahar, Afghanistan, and continues till this day for his descendant, Aga Khan IV, the grandson of Aga Khan III, who became Imam in 1957 at the passing of Aga Khan III. Rawlinson wrote to Sir William Macnaghten, who was the British envoy stationed in Kabul, and suggested to him that the Aga Khan could play a strategic role on behalf of the British colonial government. After he had met Rawlinson, Aga Khan I wrote to him and explained the strategic possibilities he

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<sup>94</sup> Paroo, Alia, *Aga Khan III and the British Empire: The Ismailis in Tanganyika, 1920-1957* (PhD diss., York University, Toronto, 2012), 35

<sup>95</sup> Purohit, Teena, *The Aga Khan Case – Religion and Identity in Colonial India* (Harvard Univ.Press: Cambridge, 2012), 18

saw. His primary objective was to get the British to help him take-over Persia and install him as the Shah.<sup>96</sup> It was not to be, but the relationships established from that point on became critical in the migration of Ismailis to East Africa. Once the Germans were defeated in World War I, Aga Khan III was the main proponent in helping Ismailis move to Tanganyika, Kenya and Uganda and Zanzibar.

The Imams operate on a system of advice-giving and an almost maniacal acceptance of this advice, as if it were given by God Himself, by the Ismailis. It is meant to be followed and generally, it is, to the spirit if not the letter. The primary bone of contention between the Imam and the Khoja Ismailis of Sind, Kachchh and Gujarat, was in the early part of the new relationship when Aga Khan I came to Sind. The Khojas were not used to having him controlling them, their mosques and their financial resources. Khojas were dispersed over many countries and when Aga Khan I moved to Bombay, it took him a while to convince Khojas that they should consider him as the lawful Imam and pay their tithes to him and to devote themselves to him. Despite these conflicts, at the end of it all, Ismailis had their Imam back and the entire worldwide Ismaili community began to accept the leadership of the Aga Khan, notwithstanding the variety of schools of worship they belonged to and practice.

Aga Khan II was Imam for a short time and four years after his coronation as Imam, he contracted pneumonia and died, making his 8-year-old son, Sultan Mohamed Shah, as the forty-eighth Imam of the Ismailis in August 1885. Aga Khan III, Sultan Mohamed Shah, (1877-1957) was the Imam who moved the needle for Ismailis. He was an international figure and an incredibly influential man. He easily floated within international society and began to participate

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

in world affairs, culminating in becoming the first President of the League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations. For Ismailis, this was a coming out for them back onto the world stage to recoup their position lost after the fall of the Fatimid Empire. Sultan Mohamed Shah was given various titles and honors by the British monarchy. His influence is shown in the following story:

...he travelled to Germany to meet Queen Victoria's grandson, Kaiser Wilhelm II, at Sans Souci, his palace in Potsdam a short distance from Berlin. This was to be a political, not a social visit. He was entertained during his stay, but not in the grand style he had experienced in London. The Aga Khan (III) had many Khoja followers in German East Africa, who for years had been seeking rice-growing concessions along the banks of the River Rufiji near Dar es Salaam which had been denied by the Germans. After two discussions with the Kaiser, the Aga Khan won these concessions for his people.<sup>97</sup>

However, like his grandfather, he encountered dissension amongst some of his followers. In 1908, the Haji Bibi case, was argued in the Bombay Courts. Again, the judge ruled in favor of Aga Khan III and affirmed his exclusive rights to the estate of his father as well as to the offerings given to him.<sup>98</sup>

This account is like others where the Aga Khans have used their influence and connections to better the lives of the Ismailis. While migration had been a trickle from India in the early part of the nineteenth century, the double forces of plague and famine in northwestern India forced many Ismailis to look for newer pastures in the late nineteenth century. Ismailis, or

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<sup>97</sup> Anne Edwards, *Throne of Gold – The Lives of the Aga Khans* (W. Morrow & Co.Inc.: New York, 1995), 51

<sup>98</sup> Purohit, Teena, *The Aga Khan Case – Religion and Identity in Colonial India* (Harvard Univ.Press: Cambridge, 2012), 115

at least those who had resources, heeded the Imam's advice to seek greener pastures. Whenever Ismaili leaders or those fortunate enough to obtain a personal audience, they were told that they should go to East Africa where the "three uncrowned kings"<sup>99</sup> of Ismailis would help them.

When one talks to people in Canada, many attribute their wealth and wellbeing to their ancestors having been helped by these three gentlemen.

Like his grandfather, Aga Khan III, Aga Khan IV (1957-Current), was critical in solidifying Ismaili positions in the political climate of independence. He was also instrumental in getting the Canadian government to take in Ismaili refugees from Uganda after they had been kicked out by Idi Amin of Uganda. The Aga Khans have been instrumental in many ways to the betterment of Ismailis, regardless of the validity of religious beliefs. The Aga Khans circle of influence made Ismaili lives safe and opened many doors for them, in business and in politics and helped settle them. Wherever Ismailis went, they were told to participate as full, loyal citizens of their country of adoption. This advice was given to help them integrate to a point and make them less noticeable as outsiders. Ismailis were generally, as were other Indian communities, insular in nature. Today, Ismailis enjoy an excellent acceptance by their country of adoption and participate in its government as well as in the mainstream of business.

### **Economic Background**

Ismailis made up the largest group of Indians from North Western India to migrate to East Africa. Apart from indentured laborers who were brought in to build the railroad in Kenya, most other Indians were attracted to East Africa for a) the umbrella of protection provided by

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<sup>99</sup> Kassamali Paroo, *Pioneering Ismaili Settlement in East Africa* (Private papers, January 1970) Obtained from family members in Orlando, FL 2017.

British rule b) by economic opportunities because of the construction of the railroad in Kenya and Uganda c) by the opening of the interior by other Indians settled in East Africa. Hindus made up the other large group of Indians. Khojas, that is Ismailis and the other Shias, came with their families. Hindu traders did not, for fear of losing their caste. They had to contend with the rule that if they left their homeland they would not be able to perform the required religious tasks for their caste and thus lose their standing in the caste hierarchy. In medieval times, the rules became more orthodox and travel by sea was forbidden. This rule hindered the movement of Hindus to Muscat and East Africa. Upper castes did not travel by sea and in fact outsourced their overseas trade to the Arabs.<sup>100</sup> Lower castes continued to travel and were not affected by the possible loss of caste. Sir Bartle Frere wrote to Foreign Secretary Lord Granville of the British Government that, “Indian immigration to this coast has gone on at a constantly increasing rate which bids fair to restore the Indian trade with East Africa to more than its old proportions.”<sup>101</sup> Frere noted that:

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that all trade passes through Indian hands. African, Arab and European, all use an Indian agent or Banian to manage the details of buying and selling; and without the intervention of an Indian, either as capitalist or petty trader, very little business is done.<sup>102</sup>

Frere also mentions that:

With rare exceptions, all these Indian traders are birds of passage. The houses they belong to may be of old standing, and we met a few old men who had been in Africa all

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<sup>100</sup> <https://www.dailyo.in/variety/hindus-caste-nris-abroad-brahmins-dalits-ramayana-sea-trade-kalapani-mughals/story/1/15103.html>

<sup>101</sup> Sir Bartle Frere regarding Indians memo to Lord Granville, Administration report Enclosure 1, No.51, 1873, MSA, Vol.V,

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

their lives; but they were exceptions. The Hindoos never bring their wives or families to Africa, the Bohras and Khojas (Ismailis and Ithnasheris) do, frequently.<sup>103</sup>

In the last final waning years of the nineteenth century, as the interior began to open, it encouraged the flow of immigration from India. By the early twentieth century, as far as the colonists were concerned, they relied on their mother countries to provide security and favoritism. Kenya was viewed differently than Uganda. Tanganyika had already been taken over by the Germans. In Kenya, which was considered the most amenable to European settlement, the settlers started homesteading without regard to the native people. In Kenya, they took the best land for cash crops and displaced by force the Kikuyu people in the highlands. Eventually, that would lead to the Mau Mau insurgency. The British considered East Africa as an appendage of India. Sir Harry Johnston, wrote in his report to the Colonial Office, that the Indian is viewed favorably by the natives and this would help the British keep Indians as a buffer between them and the natives.<sup>104</sup> Sir Charles Eliot writing to the colonial office:

Believing as I do that the East African Highlands are for the most part a white man's country... I doubt the expediency of settling large bodies of Indians in them, as even in Mombasa there is considerable friction between the European and the Indian traders.<sup>105</sup>

Thus, the seeds of dissension were sowed and for the next sixty years, this favoritism of the colonists would make the African at the bottom of the ladder and the Indians providing them cover. It was the same in Tanganyika except the loss of Germany to Britain in the First World War gave Britain Tanganyika territory as a protectorate by the league of Nations.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> J.S. Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa c.1889 to 1945*, (U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), 65.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 66



Apart from the Ismailis, among the Muslims, the Bohras and the Ithnasheris were the next largest group. It is interesting to note that they were all from Kachchh and Kathiawar in Gujarat. So were most of the Hindus who were also from Gujarat, Surat and Bombay.

## **Bohras**

The Bohras were Shias and were known as Mustali Ismailis as well. They split from the Ismailis in the eleventh century.<sup>106</sup> In Gujarat, they were prominent traders. Thus, it is assumed that they must have been involved in the trade with East Africa but there are no written records. All Indian castes and groups were lumped together under the terms “Banyan” and “Hindis.”<sup>107</sup> According to Amiji, communal traditions talk about the reluctance of the Bohras to settle in East Africa who, having sold their goods, then returned to India, facilitated by the monsoon that blew from north western India and back from April to September. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Bohra settlement received a boost from the shift southward in the trading activities of the Omani Arabs as well as British, American and German merchants. Additionally, Seyyid Said moved his capital from Muscat to Zanzibar. The Sultan encouraged the Hindus and Muslim financiers to migrate from Muscat to Zanzibar. Though the Sultan belonged to the puritanical Ibadi sect of Islam, he afforded religious tolerance to the Hindus and other Muslims.<sup>108</sup> In his annual report for Zanzibar, the British Consul C.P. Rigby, wrote how important the Bohras, Khojas and Hindus were to the economy of Zanzibar. “Each sailing vessel from Kachchh brings a number of Khoja and Bohra families as settlers.”<sup>109</sup> One of the most prominent of Bohra

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<sup>106</sup> Hatim Amiji, “The Bohras of East Africa” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol.7, Fase. 1 (1975): 30

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 35

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 36

families was the Karimjee family. They had several different types of businesses and maintained a high amount of charity. Gilbert Oonk is an academic in the Department of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Netherlands. The Karimjees asked him to write their family history in 2006. The result was an interesting book, *The Karimjee Jivanjee Family – Merchant Princes of East Africa, 1800 – 2000*.

Oonk argued the Karimjees were a “diasporic family firm”.<sup>110</sup> In this study of the Karimjees, Oonk has gone back 150 years into their past. The family opened all their archives, business correspondence and invoices from which Oonk was able to write his book. Karimjees were well-known in Tanzania and played an important role in the development of Tanganyika. They were also involved in many political roles and one of the Karimjee Brothers sons, Abdulkarim, was the first speaker of the newly independent Tanganyika’s Parliament. Originally, they came from Mandvi, the main egress port of Kachchh. They were petty traders, like many of their counterparts. Oonk refers to famines and economic hard times in the early nineteenth century as the main impetus for Karimjees to look for a new way of living. These same factors played a similar role in most migratory experiences from Kachchh. The founding father of the Karimjee family arrived in Zanzibar in 1818. The Karimjees started their businesses before the Ismaili tycoons, Tharia Topan and the three merchant princes mentioned earlier. However, it is interesting to note that Karimjees are the only ones still active who still have their business in Tanzania.

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<sup>110</sup> “Karimjee Jivanjee & Co in Tanzania, 1860–2000: A Case for ‘diasporic Family Firms’”. In Ute Rösenthaler and Alessandro Jedlowski (eds) *Mobility Between Africa, Asia and Latin America: Economic Networks and Cultural Interactions*. (zed Books 2017), 49–71, 2017. <http://hdl.handle.net/1765/99360>.

## **Hindus**

Hindus played a very important role in the economic development of East Africa.<sup>111</sup> The majority of the Hindus were traders from the Lohanas caste or the Bhatia caste. Most of the Muslims i.e. the Khojas (Ismailis, Ithnasheris and Bohras) or Kachchi Memons were Muslim, both Shia and Sunni. In fact, the Muslims were converted in the thirteenth century from Hinduism to Islam.<sup>112</sup> According to Dr. Goswami, these disparate people shared the same path of migration – from north-western modern-day Pakistan in the Punjab, down along the Indus trade routes and then finally settling in different areas of northern Kachchh. They became pastoralists and agriculturists. The histories of Hindus and Muslims is interrelated. Muslims were considered Hindu apprentices; Lohanas were converted to Memons, Ismailis believe that they are converted from Lohanas or Bhatias while Bohras are converted Brahmins. The two peoples share many cultural beliefs and rituals and are at ease with one another.

## **Bhatias**

Bhatias played a critical role in the expansion of trade between Kachchh and Zanzibar via Muscat. They were probably the first Hindu merchants to do business in Muscat and Zanzibar. And, they were the most successful. From the Kachchh ports of Mandvi and Porbander as well as Bombay, they expanded the Indian ocean trade between India and Africa. They were called *Banians*<sup>113</sup> by Arabs and *Banianis* by the Swahili. The Gujarati accounts of the Bhatias show that

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<sup>111</sup> See Makrand Mehta's article on *Gujarati Business Communities in East African: Major Historical Trends* Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.36, No.20 (May 19-25, 2001), pp.1738-1747

<sup>112</sup> Chayya Goswami, *The Call of the Sea – Kachchi traders in Muscat and Zanzibar, c. 1800-1880* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 28-35

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

they had colonies in Muscat, Aden and Zanzibar. Their base ports in Kachchh were Mundra and Mandvi. Primarily, they acted as merchants, bankers and brokers. In Muscat and Zanzibar, they dominated trade.

### **Lohanas**

It is written in Ismaili history that Khoja Ismailis were Lohanas before they were converted. Lohanas originated in Multan in the Punjab. From there, they were driven into Sindh by Muslims at different periods<sup>114</sup>. In the thirteenth century, they migrated to Kachchh. Lohanas claimed that their warrior ancestors contained the ‘Turkish’ threat. They became weavers and then moved on to textile and general trading.

### **Sunni Memons**

Kachchhi Memons are belong to both Hinduism and Islam. The ones who converted to Islam in 1432 A.D. were soon ostracized by their Hindu brothers in Sindh and this led to their migration to Kachchh.<sup>115</sup> Their business reputation is well-known in India as well as East Africa. They migrated to Zanzibar in small numbers. They have a strong bond with each other. I know some Ismaili Memons who help each other tremendously. They have a well-built mechanism for financing business with each other and if you are a Memon, all you need is your word to get financing.

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<sup>114</sup> Makrand Mehta, “Gujarati Business Communities in East African: Major Historical Trends,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.36, No.20 (May 19-25, 2001), p.1740

<sup>115</sup> Chayya Goswami, *The Call of the Sea – Kachchi traders in Muscat and Zanzibar, c. 1800-1880* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 35

These were the players in the migration milieu of Zanzibar and East Africa in the nineteenth century. Other scholars have put forward a theory of persecution. The three Shia communities were shut out of opportunities by the fanatical Sunni rulers during the Sultanate and it was during the mogul period, that the Shias branched off into business. The three *uncrowned kings of East Africa* were important to Ismailis. These three gentlemen facilitated many of their kin and countrymen's journey and settlement in East Africa. Kachchhis were set up in business in the interior of East Africa to expand the distribution network or were employed by businesses owned and operated by these three gentlemen. These three were responsible for much of the earlier migration. It was the late nineteenth century that other people from Kachchh, Gujarat and western India went to India as indentured laborers or civil servants in the expansion of the British colonies.

Ismaili documents talk about these three gentlemen with reverence, calling them *Merchant Princes*. Judy Aldrick writes in *The Sultan's Spymaster* that Sir Tharia Topan was 12 years old when he stowed away on a dhow heading to Zanzibar. He was one of the earliest Khoja Ismailis to settle in Zanzibar. He was born in Lakhpat near the port of Mandvi, the son of a poor vegetable seller. The story goes that he was accused of theft and ran down to the harbor to escape the mob. Safely ensconced in a hiding place on the dhow, he was later discovered by the captain who took pity on him as Tharia explained how he was falsely accused. The captain took pity on him and agreed to take him to Zanzibar rather than throw him overboard, which was the usual punishment.<sup>116</sup> Tharia got a job as a garden boy to the Customs Master, Ladha Damji, a powerful

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<sup>116</sup> Khojawiki.org, "Personal stories of the individual members of the socio-ethnic group known as the "*Khojas of Western India*". <http://khowiki.org/Merchant Prince>

and rich person next only to the Sultan of Zanzibar. Even though he was technically illiterate, he was a quick study in accounts and learnt the art of accounting. He was employed by the Hindu firm, Jairam Sewji. He managed to acquit himself admirably and became extremely wealthy and powerful. In 1848 when he visited Kachchh, he married his second wife and brought many Khojas to Zanzibar at his own expense and employed them in Zanzibar. He financed and organized many expeditions to the interior for people such as Dr. Livingstone and Henry Stanley. He became a close friend of Sir John Kirk and was a pioneer trader between Zanzibar and the USA. He was instrumental in influencing the Sultan to stop trading in slaves in 1873. Tharia was knighted by Queen Victoria for his efforts to stop slavery. He was knighted twice, once in Zanzibar and the second time in India in 1890. According to Judy Aldrick, it was because of his help to the British to maintain British domination in Zanzibar.<sup>117</sup>

These actors became the heroes of Kachchh, for not only escaping the hardships, but also for creating successful lives in Zanzibar. They were responsible for recruiting other Kachchhis to come to Zanzibar. In the earlier migration, they were very influential in convincing Kachchhis to take the hardships of the ocean. A prominent Ismaili hero was Haji Paroo Pradhan. Pradhan was a Kachchhi Khoja from Bhuj, a town in Gujarat, where my own family originated from. Paroo and his brother, Jaffar, came to Zanzibar to seek their fortune in 1850. He could not compete against the established merchants on Zanzibar. Therefore, he went across the Zanzibar channel and opened a store in Bagamoyo on the Tanganyika coast in 1860. Sewa Haji Paroo<sup>118</sup> was one of his children and he received his apprenticeship at the store. In 1869, his two brothers died, and

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<sup>117</sup> Judy Aldrick, *The Sultan's Spymaster*, (Old Africa Books: Kenya, 2015) p.156

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

he was left completely in charge of the store. He supplied all the main European explorers for supplies for their caravans. He also recruited porters for their caravans. He began organizing his own caravans. Some of the explorers did not like his operation as he was focused on profits and his reputation suffered. His operation was a major purveyor of guns and ammunition into the interior. However, he operated on German territory and they protected him from the British. He was very friendly with the Sultan of Zanzibar and signed a ten-year agreement with him that all the crops grown on government owned farms would be sold through Paroo. The contract only remained in force for nine months. He was a charitable person and helped his community people in business but also opened schools and hospitals for the destitute and infirm. In 1890, he opened the first multi-racial school in the Bagamoyo district.<sup>119</sup>

Alidina Visram was another larger than life personality. He came from a village in Kachchh called Kera and came to East Africa to work for Sewa Haji Paroo as an assistant. He arrived in 1877 as a young apprentice to an old established firm. When Sewa Haji died at the young age of 46, Alidina Visram took over the business and extended the business's operations in the interior all along the caravan route. He opened branches all the way into the Congo and went north towards Mwanza and Kampala in Uganda. Uganda was going to turn into a major opportunity and he opened stores in other parts of Uganda. He provided banking services to the European administrations. By the turn of the century, Alidina Visram had established a network of businesses to be envied.

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<sup>119</sup> Khojawik.org, "Personal stories of the individual members of the socio-ethnic group known as the "*Khojas of Western India*". [http://khojawiki.org/Merchant\\_Prince](http://khojawiki.org/Merchant_Prince)

...most of Alidina's scattered stores were managed by Indian assistants – drawn particularly from his Ismaili community – so that Alidina Visram may well be regarded as the pioneer of Indian **duka** (“shop” in swahili) enterprise in the interior of East Africa.<sup>120</sup>

Thus, the beginning of the migration story had been set by these people. They brought many people, paying for their passage, guaranteeing them a job and a living, and allowed people to escape the poverty and harshness of Kachchh. They laid the groundwork and many Indians benefitted from their efforts, either directly or in copying them, to establish successful enterprises.

In the following chapter, we shall read about the oral histories and stories as told to me by various people from East Africa on my trip to the two main centers of Ismaili settlement in Canada. Ismailis from East Africa who were expelled by Idi Amin from Uganda and those that were made to feel insecure for their lives and property by the political leaders of Kenya and Tanzania who had now gone on a forced migration like their ancestors for a second time.

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<sup>120</sup>J.S. Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa c.1889 to 1945*, (U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), 51-53.



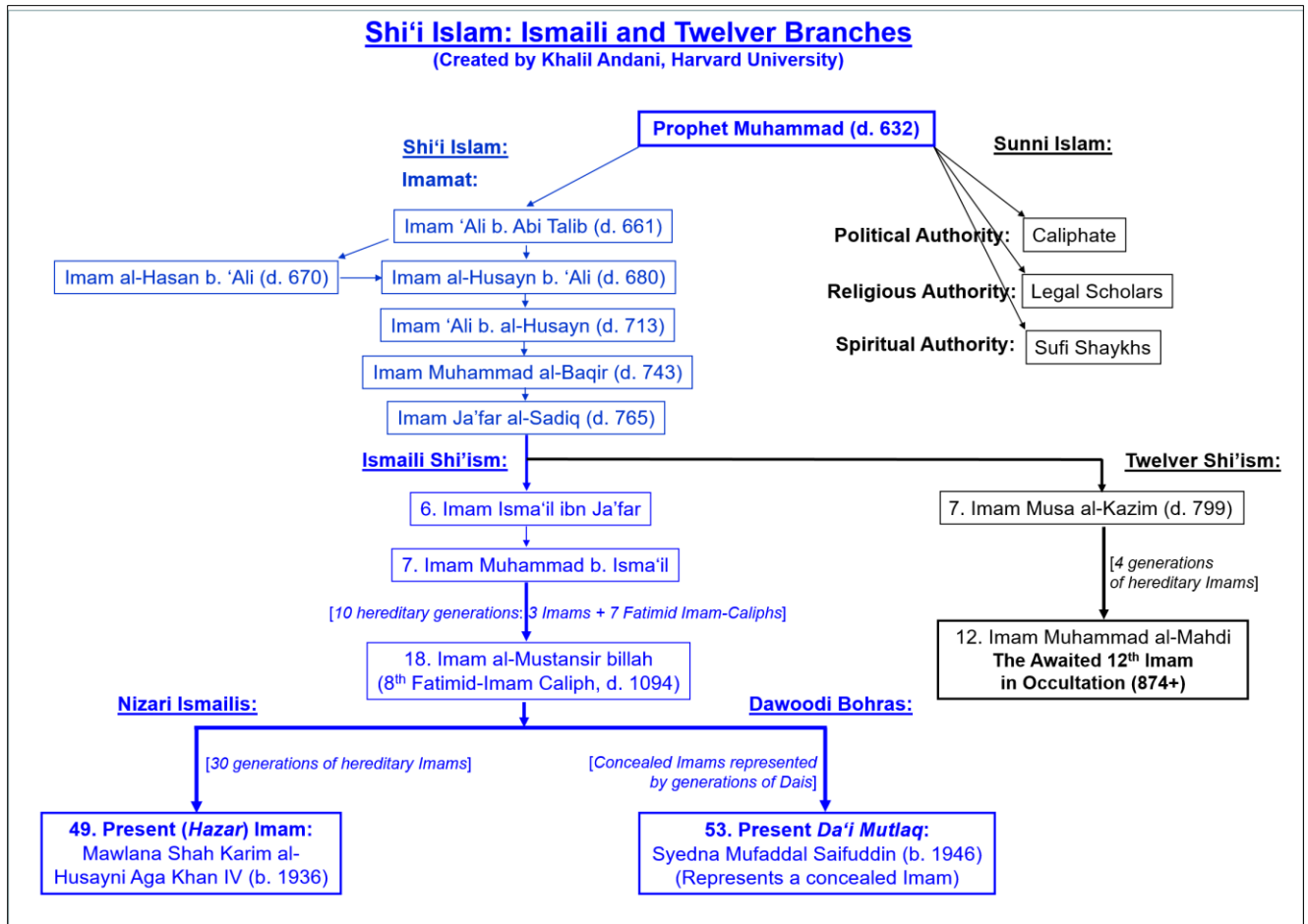


Figure 2: The Line of Ismaili and Shia Imams<sup>121</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Copyright Khalil Andani 2018. See Appendix for permission letter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE CURRENTLY LIVING IN CANADA**

For my conversations with members of the Ismaili Community, the easiest route for me was to go to Canada where a majority of the Ismailis from East Africa migrated to. The one method for me to bring this thesis into focus was to talk to the elderly in our mosques. I went to the mosques on social days, when the elderly gather for tea and snacks. I found it quite easy to talk to them and since I could converse in Kachchhi and Gujarati (though I cannot read it), they were very easy to talk to. Generally, I would walk up to them, introduce myself, and since most were from Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, I would tell them about my family which was generally well-known throughout East Africa. Once I did that, they felt I wasn't there to exploit them, and they opened up quite well.

These entries are an interesting microcosm of migration of Indians from Kachchh and give us a glimpse of life at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ismailis and Ithnasheris were competitors in all aspects of life and while Ismailis were guided by Aga Khan III and currently by Aga Khan IV, the Ithnasheris were guided by the Iranian mullahs, though it was well known that whenever the Aga Khans made any pronouncements, the Ithnasheris would take their advice and implement it for the benefit of their families.

Friday is a major day at the mosque and one meets a lot of people. I connected with Farouk Virjee in Vancouver, the great-grandson of Sulaiman Virjee. Sulaiman Virjee was very well known in East Africa and is mentioned in several colonial histories. I met him the following day to talk about his famous ancestor. Later that evening, Farouk introduced me to Jagdish Sondhi who was ninety years of age. Mr. Jagdish Raj Sondhi, who was not an Ismaili, was born in 1927 in Lahore, Pakistan and was also a civil engineer who had worked on the Railroad line

being built by the British. A wonderfully lively and charming man with an equally charming wife, Shirin, who comes from a famous and accomplished Ismaili family in Kenya, they regaled me with stories of Africa and India. Because his was a mixed marriage of caste and religion, they could not marry for seven years. Shirin, in turn, told me stories of her famous family, responsible for establishing an education trust to benefit Ismailis. Later, the Trust was amended to benefit all Kenyans. Cynthia Salvadori writes of Shirin's family in *We came in Dhows* as related to her by Rahimtulla Abdulla Rahimtulla. From my own calculations, he is the brother of Shirin.

I would like to write about my family not because it is one of the oldest and wealthiest Indian families in Kenya but because it is unique in that both my grandfather and my uncle left most of their fortunes to benefit the less fortunate members of the community.

Our family did not start rich. When my great-grandfather Waljee Hirji arrived by dhow nearly a century and a half ago he was probably penniless. He was a Khoja Ismaili from Jamkhambhalia, a small town in Kathiawar, but times must have been hard there because he and his brother left home to go to Zanzibar where there was an established Ismaili community there. They must have been very young and working for some other Ismaili there. They no doubt made contacts in Mombasa where there must have been other Indians trading. In 1867 my great-grandfather moved up to Mombasa to go into business for himself.

My great-grandfather opened a small shop close to the old harbor and dealt in general merchandise, I suppose whatever he could buy and sell....

When the British started building the Railway, business really flourished. As there was only one proper bank in Mombasa at the time, "Waljee Hirjee and Sons" became a major commission agency, handling hundreds of thousands of rupees for thousands of laborers sending their wages back to India. As the Railway arrived in Nairobi so did Waljee Hirjee

& Sons, opening a branch in the Bazaar. They also began buying property for development.<sup>122</sup>

Farouk Virjee, the gentleman who introduced me to the Sondhis, comes from an equally distinguished background and family in Kenya. Along with the others like Jeevanjee, Alidina Visram and Sewa Haji Paroo, his ancestor, Suleiman Virjee, was one of the most successful Indian traders in East Africa. Karen Blixen of *Out of Africa* fame also mentions them as the Indian merchants who dominated the Nairobi Bazaar.<sup>123</sup> In 1896, Suleiman Virjee and Kassam Virjee travelled inland, carrying goods for sale with porters and mules. They encamped by the rail line and as it progressed. Suleiman Virjee built an extensive trading empire in East Africa second only to Alidina Visram. One of the biggest factors of migration for people of Kachchh was the famine known as “Chappanyo” and it was most severe in Gujarat. Because of their strong connections to East Africa, many hundreds made their way out of the famine-stricken land and through the Port of Porbander left for Africa. They had heard that the streets of East Africa were paved with gold.

Ismailis are very close knit and, very much like the Jewish people, help each other. Murad Velshi is a prominent Canadian immigrant who was born in 1935. His family, who unlike other Indian migrants, moved to South Africa. He was born in Victoria City, a suburb of Johannesburg. His parents came from Chotilal, Gujarat in the 1890's. Murad moved his family to Canada and he integrated so well that he became one of the first Indian politicians in Ontario, Canada as the Liberal member of the Legislative assembly of Ontario from 1987 to 1990. He has

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 60-61

<sup>123</sup> Farouk Virjee, “*Suleman Virjee Family – Kenya and Uganda, 1872 onwards*” Ismaili Uganda Asians, Canadian community paper article.

a famous son, Ali Velshi, currently on the MSNBC network. Murad told me that the Aga Khan advised him to move from South Africa to East Africa in the 1960's to escape apartheid. The Aga Khan has a pervasive influence in Ismaili life and it is rare to find any criticism from any Ismaili who resents what he has advised them to do.

### **The Ithnasheris**

Ithnasheris are the largest group of Shia Muslims in the world, though they were second to Ismailis in numbers in East Africa. Those who were from Gujarat called themselves Khoja Ithnasheris to differentiate from the Khoja Ismailis. Their ancestors had split from the Ismailis in 1866 and again in 1908, after the case famously known as the Haji Bibi case. The Ithnasheris were equally entrepreneurial and determined to escape the drought-ridden land. For them, though they did not follow the Imam, they attempted to follow his advice. This would reach them from other Ismailis who were related to them or were family members. They, too, headed for Muscat and Zanzibar. As their numbers grew, they created a trade directory of their community members in East Africa in 1960 to encourage business and trade among their members. At the end of the listings are short descriptions and histories of some of the people in the directory with some details. Where they like Ismaili stories? In the breakup of Ismailis, there were families that were split up. Many of them maintained contacts with their relatives and there is no doubt that any advice or guidance given to Ismailis soon filtered to those who became Ithnasheris. I took a few of the entries, which are all in Gujarati, and I had them translated here in the USA.

In this trade directory are descriptions of prominent Ithnasheris like Walji Bhai Bhanji. He relates his story<sup>124</sup> on page 19. He came from Malia Hatina (India) to Mombasa in 1898. Walji Bhai's brother Karimbhai Bhanji came to Zanzibar in 1897 and worked for Alidina Kanji. Walji Bhai started his own business selling tobacco, matches and small things etc. In the year 1899, when they started building the railroad from Kilindi to Nairobi, Walji Bhai moved and started his business in Nairobi and he was the first one from the community to start this business. In the year 1902, he opened a new business with branches in Kenya and Uganda.

Juma Haji was a successful but simple man from Tanganyika. He was a director for Juma Haji and Co. Ltd. He was born in Lalpur (India) and went to school there. He came to Dar-es-Salaam at the age of 18. He went to work for his uncle's cloth business and in 1910, he opened his own store. In 1921, he opened a new branch in the Congo and Albertville. According to the directory, he was a very successful business man. In 1930, he was elected secretary for the Dar-es-Salaam council (the Ithnasheri) and in 1938 he became a trustee for the jamat (community). Ithnasheris emulated Ismailis including their administrative structure. He was elected as vice-president for the Tanganyika Educational Council. He also built the Ibrahim Haji Dispensary (clinic) in memory of his brother. Ghulam Ali Jiwan from came to Mombasa by ship from India in 1902 and stayed with Walji Bhanji for 22 days. After that he went to Dar-es-salaam by ship. Dar-es-salaam was a small village surrounded by jungle. Animals used to come into the city. In the rainy season, the streets would get flooded. There was no transportation and people had to

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<sup>124</sup> Published by The Supreme Council of the Federation of Khoja Shia Ithnasheri Jamaats of Africa, 30<sup>th</sup> December, 1960

walk to get around the city. In 1914, during the war, people stayed in the jungle and whenever there was peace in the city, they would return to work.

Ibrahim Haji of Dar-es-Salaam was born in Lalpur (India) in 1892. After his schooling, he settled in Dar-es-Salaam in 1910 and joined his brother in business who had started his business in the Congo. Because of problems in the Congo, no one wanted to move there. He was brave and adventurous as well as hard working. This gave him the pre-requisites for success. After he had moved, a lot of his family joined him. He made a lot of changes in the Jamat (community). He was president for the Dar-es-Salaam jamat (Ithnasheri) from 1942 to 1946. He was vice-president for Dar-es-Salaam Merchant Chamber of Commerce. There still exists in Dar-es-Salaam, in the Muslim Institute, an assembly hall named Ibrahim Haji Assembly hall.

Ladha Damji, Zanzibar on page 125 of the directory moved to Zanzibar in 1901 when he was 17 years old and began to work for Shivji bhai Ladak Merali. During that time, he met Nasser Virji from Bagamoyo and joined him as an employee, under a three-year contract. After working there for some time, he moved to Kilimathide, a village in the Singida region of Tanganyika where the Germans had a fortress. Since there was no public transport available, he walked for twenty days to get to Kilimathide. In 1908 he went back to India to get married. He came back to Zanzibar, took a boat to Dar-es-Salaam and went to Kigoma by train. (Kigoma is on Lake Tanganyika in north western Tanzania.) There were Ismailis and Ithnasheris in Kigoma. The Ithnasheri jamat was approximately 40 people. He settled in Kigoma for business.

The directory lists Haji Sivaji in Lindi, which is a town on the coast, located in southeastern Tanganyika. He came from India to Zanzibar in 1910 when he was 18 years old. He worked for Gulamhusein Somji Lilani for 100 rupees a year. He left his job in one year and went to Kilwa by ship. With his companion, he walked to Songea with his tent and luggage. They

would walk for six hours and then rest. Songea was 500 miles from Kilwa and it took them 24 days to get there. In the year 1913, he went back to India to get married and then went for Haj to Mecca. 1917, (an important fact for directory users who would want to do business with him. It would help establish his honesty and integrity.) and later he opened an office in Dar-es-Salaam, in Tanganyika. Mulla Gulamhusein Kanji was born in Lamuma, in 1906. He came to Mombasa, when he was 12. He went to work for Jaffer Dewji. After two years there, he moved to Moshi in 1921. Moshi is a small village surrounded by mountains and jungle and is situated in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro. In 1923, he started his own business and then opened a branch in Arusha.

Since the uncertainties created by Idi Amin forced Ismailis to sell their businesses and move to Europe and North America, Ithnasheris are now in command of much of the economy of Tanzania. One of their members, Mohamed Dewji, 43, is a Forbes certified billionaire of Africa.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Forbes 2019 ranking. <https://www.forbes.com/africa-billionaires/list/#tab:overall> accessed 3/3/2019



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

I undertook this thesis partly to satisfy my own desire to find out exactly how my family ended up in East Africa. Even though I was not able to get specific dates, I was able to discern that my family, like others, came around 1898 to Zanzibar, just after the advice given by Aga Khan III. For Ismailis, the Aga Khan's advice proved to be a prime mover for them to leave Kachchh, their ancestral homeland. Migration is an opportunistic act, motivated by economic opportunity and security for the family. In Kachchh, the factor most important to a pastoral community, was the famines. Famines seemed to occur every 10 years.<sup>126</sup> The high probability of an agricultural disaster meant that families would go hungry. At the same time, “*divine*” intervention from the Imam meant that they enjoyed protection from harm on their lives. The famines and the advice of the Aga Khans were the main “push” factors that played an important part for them to move to Zanzibar and other points in East Africa.

For other communities, the fact that the Ismailis were moving, was a good enough reason to consider a move themselves. Kachchhi business people are very opportunistic and the stories of wealth in East Africa precluded any fear of the mighty ocean journey. Starting with a handful of people from Kachchh and Sind, Surat and Bhavnagar, that by 1819, they numbered 214<sup>127</sup>. They were already described as wealthy individuals who held “the best part of the trade”.<sup>128</sup> Many of the migrants from Kachchh were modest individuals who, through their entrepreneurship, became well-to-do settlers. Interestingly, the British discovered that the Indians already had control of the economy. The British slowly imposed their control because of

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<sup>126</sup> Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (Oxford, UK: James Curry Ltd, 1987), 84

<sup>127</sup> A. Sheriff, “Migration and Creation of New Societies: A Story from the Indian Ocean”, in E. A. Alpers & C. Goswami, eds., *Situating Gujarat in the Indian Ocean*, Oxford University Press (India), forthcoming.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

their control of India. I am convinced that Indians conceded control because of British jurisprudence and they would rather answer to that than to the whims of the Sultan of Zanzibar.

The Hindus, because of their customs, did not bring their wives. In the 1870's, in a population of 200-300 Hindus, there was not a single woman according to the British census. They ended up co-habiting with Arab women or African slave girls<sup>129</sup> which they could neither marry nor bring home because of their Hindu customs. In 1859, C.P. Rigby, the consul from 1859-1861, observed that there were approximately 5000-6000 Indians in Zanzibar. Between 1840-1870, Khojas had multiplied many times over.<sup>130</sup> Ismailis had brought their women and their numbers had therefore increased.

Famine laid the seed of migration and the Aga Khans advised his followers to head west and then south. One major factor that aided Ismailis was the Aga Khans political influence with the British. They were able to obtain special favors from the British for Ismailis. Despite that, the other communities managed on their own and became powerful as well. They were only slowed by their traditions or cultural customs. The stories all repeat the same factors included in the books that have been written including those by nineteenth century explorers of Africa.

The Indian Ocean is a creator. Neville Chittick, the archaeologist, in his paper on *East Africa and the Orient ports and trade before the arrival of the Portuguese* said that the Indian Ocean is arguably the largest cultural continuum in the world. The French historian, Michael Mollat described the Indian Ocean in Braudelian terms:<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Richard F. Burton, *Zanzibar, City, Island and Coast*, 2 Vols (Univ. Press of the Pacific: Honolulu, Hawaii)

<sup>130</sup> Chhaya Goswami, *The Call of the Sea* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 174

<sup>131</sup> Abdul Sheriff and Enseng Ho, ed, *The Indian Ocean: Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies* (London: Hurst & Co.2014), 1

A mediterranean... a zone of encounters and contacts, crossed in all directions by axes of circulation, center for all types of exchanges and sensitive to the most diverse and distant influences, the Indian Ocean, more than many other oceans and seas, is a privileged crossroads of culture.

What were the effects of the trans-continental migration? Indians are rarely mentioned in the national histories of East Africa. While they contributed a lot to the national struggle for independence and to the economy, they were always treated as strangers. Of course, they did not help by not integrating fully and remaining isolated. This allowed the British to use them as a buffer with the Africans. When one talked to Africans, it was always about cross-breeding Africans to Indians. There was no attempt to accept the settlers as having their own traditions or customs. This also resulted in Indians being accused of not participating in the national struggle for independence, though that is not entirely true. Many Indians funded the Tanzanian African National Union, among them my grandfather. Eventually, it led to another rupture. Idi Amin of Uganda came on the scene and used Indians as the bogey man. He decided to expel all the Indians in Uganda with a ninety-day notice. This expulsion led to a feeling of uncertainty in the entire Indian community of East Africa. Even those of us who were citizens and had been drafted, found that we had to think of leaving. So, a second migration for Ismailis took place and because of the Aga Khan IV's friendship with Pierre Trudeau, Ismailis from Tanzania went to Canada. Ithnasheris followed as did the Bohra community. Hindus went to Great Britain as they carried British passports, having been reluctant to become Tanzanian citizens.

Today, this migration has been the most successful. The Ismailis who are on the North American continent never talk about moving back. A few years back, the Tanzanian President on a visit to Canada asked them to come back. All the Indians asked him is would he give them

back all the nationalized properties? Tanzania would not do that. All the communities are well settled and in the environment of business, have been most successful in establishing new lives and their children are thriving. Yet, they keep their traditions and religions and establish houses of worship.

Ismailis, especially Ugandan Ismailis, celebrate the day of expulsion in Canada and thank Idi Amin for kicking them out!

**APPENDIX A: PERMISSION FOR USE OF FIGURE 2**

**From:** Khalil Andani <[kha505@mail.harvard.edu](mailto:kha505@mail.harvard.edu)>  
**Sent:** Saturday, February 24, 2018 2:12:43 PM  
**To:** Azizeddin Tejpar  
**Subject:** Re: Request for permission

Dear Aziz, Ya Ali Madad:

Very nice to hear from you. Yes Ajmal Andani is my dad's brother and all of us were Toronto during my childhood.

You are most welcome to reproduce my graphic in your thesis. I wish you the best of luck in writing it!

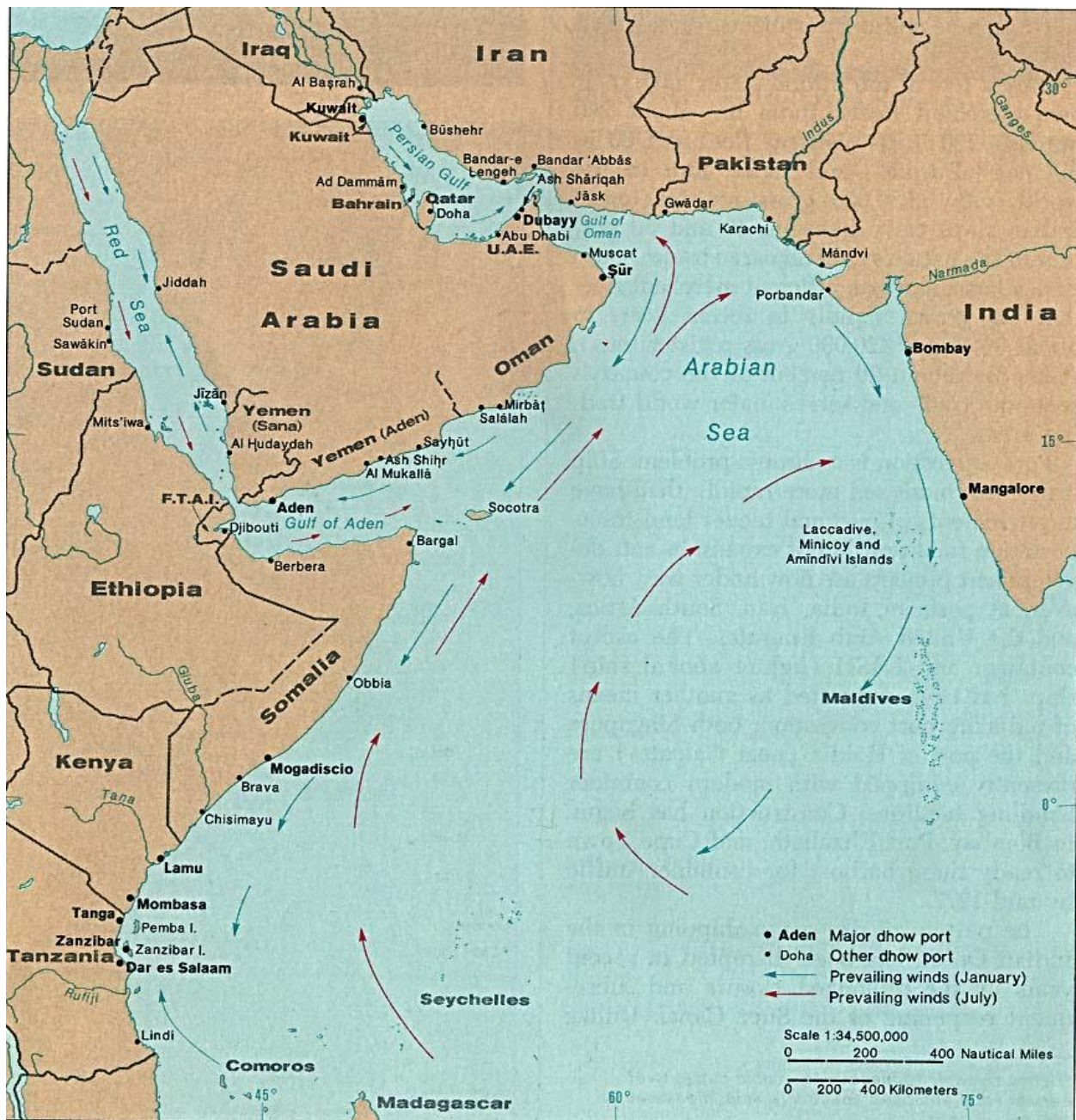
Khalil  
Sent from my iPhone

On Feb 24, 2018, at 12:03 PM, Azizeddin Tejpar <[aziz.tejpar@Knights.ucf.edu](mailto:aziz.tejpar@Knights.ucf.edu)> wrote:  
Dear Khalil:

I believe that Ajmal is your uncle. We were classmates in Tanzania. I am currently doing an MA in History at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. I am writing my thesis on the Migration of Indians to East Africa. In one of my chapters, I am writing about Ismailis and need to give an introductory background on our religion. I came across a graphic showing the imamat tree and would like to reproduce it in my paper. I would be very grateful if you could kindly give me written permission to use the tree.

Look forward to hearing from you,  
Aziz Tejpar  
[aziz.tejpar@knights.ucf.edu](mailto:aziz.tejpar@knights.ucf.edu)  
407.256.7030

**APPENDIX B: MAP OF THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN**





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