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VERSI ADVANI FAMILY - THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE COMMUNITY

VERSI ADVANI

In 1835, Versi Advani migrated to Zanzibar from Bhuj, Gujarat, India with his three brothers: Khalfan, Abdulrasul and Gulamhussein. The other two brothers Mohamed and Khatau migrated later on.

It is thought that Versi Advani was probably a Sindhi Khoja who may have intermarried with Khoja of Cutchi and Kathiawari origin. He was among the first converts to Shia Ithnaasheri faith, others being Dewji Jamal, Mohamed Walji, Lakha Kanji, Mohamed Lakha, Janmohamed Rawji, Nasser Lilani and Saleh Sachedina. He was among the 12 pioneers of Kuwwat Jamaat of Khoja Shia Ithnaasheri of Zanzibar. His name appears among the signatories of the Kuwwat Mosque Waqf Registration of 1881, stored at Zanzibar Archives.

During the crisis in Kilwa around the 1910s when the Jamaat refused rituals like majlis to be conducted at home, a permission was required to be obtained from the Waras in Zanzibar. Versi Advani together with Haji Peera Walli, Nasser Lilani and Lakha Kanji resolved this issue by requesting the Waras to write a letter giving permission for majlis to be recited at home.

It is also reported that Versi Advani and Sachoo Peera were among the few people in Dar es Salaam who were allowed to hoist German flag at their houses. Versi Advani is also reported to have formed a friendship with Sachoo Peera and Nasser Mawji. The trio gave lots of services in religious and social fields in Dar es Salaam. Versi and Nasser helped Sachoo Peera in construction of the first mosque for Dar es Salaam Jamaat in 1907. It is also reported that the old Imambara in Dar es Salaam was constructed mainly by the efforts of Versi Advani.

GULAMHUSSEIN VERSI

Gulamhussein Versi was the younger son of Versi and born in 1868 in Zanzibar. He had five sons and one daughter: Mohamedhassan, Mohamedtaki, Abdulhussein, Yusuf, Hassanali and Rukiya H M Rashid. Abdulhussein and Yusuf (Yugu) were good cricketers of the old generation. They were selected in the Zanzibar National Team to play cricket against British Navy ship in 1926. Abdulhussein's son Jaffer Versi was also a good sportsman and cricketer. He moved from Zanzibar to Lindi to manage sisal plantations of M Suleman Versi and then established Eastern Trading Co in Dar es Salaam. Marhum Jaffer's son Ahmed Versi is the founder and editor of Muslim News UK and grandson Miqdaad Versi is active in UK media voicing Muslim concerns. Amir H G Versi (Pawdo) was also a famous East African cricketer. Gulamhussein Versi passed away in Zanzibar in 1943.

SULEMAN VERSI



Suleman Versi
1856-1910

Suleman Versi was born in 1856 in Zanzibar. He was a well-known businessman, an importer and exporter believed to be trading with the Middle East and India in multitude of items including spices. It is believed that he was a Wazir or a member in the Elders' Council of Sultan Barghash of Zanzibar. He was once deported from Zanzibar by the British because he advised the Sultan against giving some concessions to the British.

Suleman Versi was a very rich merchant. The family had crockery made by Royal Doulton of Britain with the inscription "Made for the family of Suleman Versi" written underneath the ceramic bowls and plates. It is believed he had uniformed waiters serving each guest at the huge dining table at his home. Also, every morning he was presented a silver tray with a choice of dresses to wear.

It is further believed that Suleman Versi lost a big shipment at sea causing him a great loss. Once while in Mumbai he could not look after his horse and carriage and got it run over the cliff.

It is said that Suleman donated towards the establishment of graveyard (Chungani) in Dar es Salaam, the plot being donated by the Sahoo Peera family. He also helped in the establishment of Kuwwat Jamaat in Zanzibar politically and financially. Suleman Versi together with Dewji Jamal, Mohamed Walli Dharsi, Saleh Chagpar and Peera Hirji were trustees of "Remtulla Tejani Musafarkhana" which was opened in 1901 in Zanzibar. In 1907, Suleman Versi was one of the 10 Jamaat elders who signed on the citation given to Murabbi Shariff Jiwa Surti who travelled from Madagascar to reconcile the Hujjat and Kuwwat Jamaats of Zanzibar. Others being Saleh Mohamed Hassan, Remtulla Allarakhia Tejani, Jaffer Hameer, Sheriff Dewji, Walli Khatau, Mohamed Walli Dharsi, Ismail Sumar, Hasham Alibhai and Jaffer Alloo.

Suleman Versi passed away 110 years ago on 30 June 1910 while on a business visit to Mumbai from Zanzibar. He is buried at Mumbai Arambagh. The epitaph on his grave says "Jangbarwalla". Suleman was a great friend of Marhum Dawood Haji Nasser, a prominent community personality and a famous businessman of Mumbai. According to the gravekeeper of Arambagh, the family of Haji Roshanali Dawood Haji Nasser had been taking care of the grave.

Apart from Zanzibar, Suleman Versi also had business in Lindi. The German Colonial Handbook 1908 mentions "Suleman Versi & Co." as an Indian firm, resident in Lindi in 1908. It is believed that this business was a shop run by the third wife of Suleman Versi, Jetbai (Zaitunbai) Mohamed Sajan who lived with her three young children Abdulrasul, Raza and Saleh. Jetbai also had two daughters: Sherbanu Mohamedraza Rashid Nathani and Zainab Mohamedali Ali Nathoo.

Suleman's first wife was Maryam Mithani, mother of Kassamali, Mohamedali, Sakina Mohamedrafiq Abdulla Kanji and Rehmat Ali Sahoo. His second wife Sakina Remtulla Kanji had one daughter: Fatma Esmail Hasham Alloo.

SONS OF SULEMAN VERSI



Kassamali S. Versi



Abdulrasul S. Versi



Mohamedraza S. Versi



Mohamedsaleh S. Versi

Suleman Versi had 5 sons. Not much is known about his son Mohamedali, who was also a student of Mulla Muhammad Jaffer (father of Mulla Asgharali M M Jaffer). Mohamedali had three children Abdarab, Ahmed (Hamdu) and Khairun Abdulkarim J Dewji. The second son Kassamali passed away in 1935 while returning from Hajj and was buried at sea. The other three sons Abdulrasul, MohamedRaza and MohamedSaleh opened the famous AFRA at Dar es Salaam.

Marhum Abdulrasul Versi was an importer/exporter and trader in Farm Equipments in Dar es Salaam with a branch in Tanga. Among his sons are Marhum Roshanali A. Versi, who was a councillor in the City Council of Dar es Salaam. Bashir Versi was a lawyer in Dar es Salaam who later migrated to Toronto. He is currently Honorary Secretary of Sajjadiyya Trust, Crescent Village Trust and two housing corporations which provide subsidized housing to members of the community. Sajjad Versi is a retired engineer resident in Australia and had been involved in children's charity program. Currently, he is President of an NGO involved in several development projects in Horn of Africa. Kurban Versi obtained a Bachelor's degree in Education at University of Dar es Salaam after which he taught A Levels at Shinyanga and Pugu Secondary Schools from 1968 to 1971. He later migrated to Canada where he is doing accountancy. He was on the editorial board of Al Huda, official magazine of ISIJ Toronto. Mohamed Versi, grandson of Abdulrasul, owns a large construction company in Dar es Salaam.

Marhum Saleh Versi was Zanzibar Manager of TOM (Dutch Trading Co). After retiring in 1951 he ventured into the sisal business at Lindi. Meanwhile TOM also opened their branch in Lindi. They purchased a building owned by Saleh bhai and turned it into their office and warehouse.

Alhaj Husseinali Manekia (Motabha) of Orlando recalls that as a 16-year-old in 1948 he travelled to Lindi from his home town of Kilwa to look for a job. Salehbhai saw him at Fajr Namaz and got him a job the same day at TOM under the supervision of the Manager of Merchandise Dept, Mohamedhussein Pirmohamed (Bhoro Bhim).

The company of M Suleman Versi had branches in Zanzibar, Dar es Salaam, Lindi and Songea. Salehbai had purchased two sisal plantations - one at Mkoe and one at Rushungi - about 42 miles from Lindi. Sisal business was at its peak those days. Salehbai was an excellent businessman and a very busy person. He was smartly dressed, many times with a tie, and a very humble person. He travelled a lot. During flights, he carried his typewriter - a laptop of those days! As a student in Iringa, I remember once having written him a letter and the reply was, to my amazement, typed in an aerogramme with a business letterhead! I did not expect to be treated like a businessman as my letter was just a simple letter to a grand uncle.

The sisal plantations owned by Marhum Saleh Versi flourished and the plantations had their own sea port called Rushungi through which sisal was shipped out for export overseas. Some sisal was being transported from Mkoe to Lindi port through Fazal Ladha Dinani transporters. During his stay in Lindi Salehbai was able to own several properties which include the Tanesco House (glass house) and U-shaped building opposite the post office.

During my school holidays in August 1968, I accompanied Marhum Saleh and his son Aunali to Mkoe sisal farm for 3 days. I was amazed to see a colonial mansion in a jungle. I was more amazed to see that during breakfast there would be a smartly dressed cook bringing in different kinds of fruits, forks and knives and spread table mats. I had never known of such breakfast before. Felt a bit of 'mshamba'.

His son, Aunali Versi (now in Orlando), had taught me driving in Lindi. This must be done at 6 a.m. as per his wishes. During our Sisal farm trip, he gave me his Land Rover to practise driving at Mkoe beach, showed me the hippo population at Lake Mkoe, the sisal factory and a workshop. Aunali was a top cricket player in Lindi representing his school for matches in Dar es Salaam.

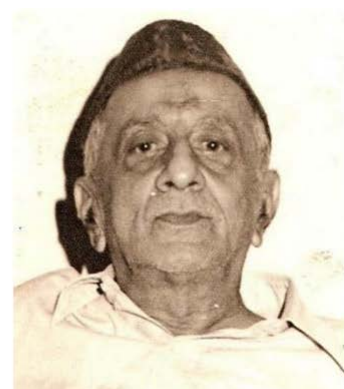
KASSAMALI SULEMAN VERSI FAMILY



Yusuf K S. Versi



Mohamedhussein K S.
Versi



Mohamedtaki K S. Versi

Kassamali Suleman Versi had four children: Yusuf, Mohamedtaki, Mohamedhussein and Nargis H R Bhalloo.

Marhum Yusuf (Yuka) was an expert in legal matters and helped a lot of people in obtaining legal documents. He worked at the advocates Wiggins & Stevens. He also worked as Zanzibar Manager of the company of M Suleman Versi. Two of his daughters served our community in Dar es Salaam as headmistress in Union Nursery School: Mrs Marzia Bhalloo and Mrs Batul Jaffer.

Marhum Taki Versi joined civil service in Zanzibar in 1925. In 1946 he joined the firm of M Suleman Versi in Zanzibar and in 1949 he was transferred to Songea. Later he joined the Dinanis as an accountant at Songea and Lindi. He was an extremely friendly and jolly person and liked children. He was my grand uncle who gave me the nickname of Abululu - and he was the only person who called me by that name. The Dinani children and in fact the whole town of Songea knew him as "Jomba Taki" as he was the maternal cousin of their mother Zehrabai Dinani. He took part in Songea Jamaat activities like the school, madressa and Jamaat programs. As a school board member, he was very particular about student discipline. During an elaborate multilingual Jamaat program "Yadgare Murtazavi" held in the month of Shaaban in 1957 he gave a welcome address and recited Qasida in Urdu. In January 1969, I had taken a 3-day bus trip from Lindi to join Form 5 at Mkwawa High School, Iringa with overnight stops in Tunduru and Songea. During my overnight stop at Songea, Jomba Taki put his foot down and told me there was no way I could continue with this arduous journey. Instead he arranged for me to travel by air from Songea to Iringa. My friend Aliraza Rajani was also on the same plane going to Dar es Salaam where he was joining Form 5 at Tambaza School. Marhum Taki's son Marhum Gulamraza was my weekend host for 3 months during my National Service training in Arusha in 1971. Marhum Taki's two other sons Hassan and Sajjad have served the community in Arusha in various positions. Marhum Taki passed away in Arusha in 1978. Marhum Taki's granddaughter Mrs Naserah Karim has served the community in Dar es Salaam as Principal of our schools. His two grandsons Fazleabbas and Kazim Pirmohamed are both active in community service in New York.

Marhuma Nargisbai H R Bhalloo's son Marhum Ahmed Bhalloo was President of Nasimco. Her other son Gulamabbas ran a very successful school in Pakistan. He passed away in Iraq during ziyarat.

Marhum Mohamedhussein - or Hussein Sinclair - is my maternal grandfather. He served the Kuwwat Jamaat as Hon Secretary. He worked at lawyer R P Patel and another one called Sinclair hence his nickname. As a child, I would read his letters and admire his powerful English and Gujarati. My mom had trained me to write letters to the elders, so I wrote to him occasionally and once even to my great grandmother Mabibi - Fatma daughter of Jaffer Hameer.

Marhum Mohamedhussein had 9 sons and two daughters. He was a very devout person with very limited means. One of the characteristics of his family was that all his sons wore coats and caps when they went to mosque. My maternal uncle Maulana Sheikh Gulamabbas Versi once mentioned that the reason for them being given nickname "Pinji" was that a classmate once took away his cap and while demanding it back he mentioned that it was an expensive one and was bought at Pinji shillings - Twenty five shillings, hence the nickname "Pinji". During my school vacations in Zanzibar, Marhum Gulamabbas would make me sit in his small electricity repair shop and teach me some skills and take me on long rides on his bicycle. At home I would sit next to his big spool tape recorder observing him starting and stopping the recorder frequently, writing down, word to word, in

Gujarati script, the Urdu majlis of Turabi and Rizvi. In 1959, Maulana Gulamabbas was one of the first Khoja students from Zanzibar to go for Aalim training to Karachi and Sargodha in Pakistan and Najaf in Iraq. Upon return he became resident aalim serving Lindi, Tunduru, and Mikindani/Mtwara Jamaat.

Maulana Gulamabbas's brother Mulla Hassan Versi left Zanzibar after 1964 to move to Lindi. Mulla Hassan Versi was Zakire Hussein, and very active in Lindi and Mikindani Jamaats reciting Duas and Majlis. His son Hussein and his three grandsons Imran, Hassan and Maisam all recite majlis in Dar es Salaam. Another brother Mulla Roshanali Versi was a resident aalim in Madagascar for many years before moving to Leicester where he served as a resident aalim too. Out of the 11 siblings only two are living: Mulla Roshanali Versi and Br Ali Versi, both in Birmingham.

Among more than 1070 descendants of the Versi Advani family there are Zakirs, philanthropists, servants to humanity and community, businessmen, professionals and sportsmen who are spread out all over the globe.

We pray to Allah (SWT) by His grace and mercy to grant Marhumeen of the Versi Advani family maghferat and heavenly abode in the proximity of Ahlulbayt (A.S.), Please remember them all with Sura-e-Fateha. May Allah reward all the servants of the community and humanity. Ameen.

Prepared by: Mustafa Pirmohamed

Sources: Zanzibar Reflections (Abdulrazak Fazal), Dar Jamaat 1967 Annual Report, Trade Directory AF 1960 (Popat Rawji) (Citation to Sheriff Jiwa Surti), Nurmohamed Manekia 1914 (Kilwa na Sawal Jawab), Hassan A M Jaffer (Endangered Species), Khojawiki, Sajjad Versi (Australia), Bashir Versi (Toronto), Kurban Versi (Toronto), Mohamed A Versi (Dar), Aunali Versi (Orlando).

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