

# THE SIGHTING OF MUHARRUM MOON EVOKING MY MOTHER'S MEMORIES



By Abdulrazak Fazal *Updated: September 2020*

## ➡ **Abdulrazak Fazal's Muharrum Photos collection**

Soon the new moon will be sighted heralding the mourning month of Muharram. The Muharram moon sighting also reminds me of my dear mother who died around this time 12 years back. Just before the 'Haj Eid' she had expressed her feelings for the coming month of Muharram reminding me to set aside her 'marsia' and 'nauha' cassettes, hardly realizing that by then she would remain no more.

Just a mention of Muharram and she would be filled with nostalgia for the Zanzibar days. Our house in Kiponda was right in front of the Junni mosque and we were literally part of its ritualistic events. The whitewash, the volunteers doing the cleaning, the imambara walls adorned with black cloth and the windows hung with black flags heralded Muharram. The imambara emanated air filled with oud fragrance as the smoke from the burnt oud urn spiraled over the glittering alams, mimber and every corner of the imambara.

The house also vibrated with melodious marsia and nauha. It was the era of the devout Khoja zealots and the soulful rendering by Mohamedhusain Ahmed ('bole imame umam, parda uthalo koi', 'jab akheri rukhsatko Husain'), Murtaza Bandali (kyukar juda huva sare', arbaike sogwaro alwida') or Jaffer Hassanali Mulla Raza (dushmankobhi khuda na dikhaye pisarka daag', kabre Husain alwida') heightened the emotionally charged atmosphere. The ladies who did not attend the majlis would come to our house to listen to it and even view 'alams' and 'shabihs' from the windows. On the eve of Ashura and Chehlum my mother would be occupied opening the evaporated and condensed milk cans and pouring milk into a big container to prepare 'sharbati ya maziwa' (milk shake), applying essence and sprinkling almonds and pistachio over it. My sister and I provided helping hands to her. At night the house would be packed

with ladies who came to view the 'julus' and then the 'sharbat' distributed to them.

Muharram evoked many poignant memories for us. The ladies gathered at our place to knead the dough and shape it into laadus which were then distributed as 'fateha' (nyaz) during majlis in our house. The house was blessed with majlises held on the 5th, 6th, and 7th afternoons of the mourning month. It was also customary for my mother to dip stock of old clothes in a container with certain liquid to blacken them as all of us must wear black. In particular I've vivid memories of holding her finger and attending the 'Mehndi' ceremony on the 7th of Muharram at Nai Misit. She moved around with thal of fruits along with other ladies encircling small girls who held 'mehndi' plates and flags. A particular incident she would often relate to us was the 1947 Muharram that she did in Karbala where at the Nasser Noormohamed Musafarkhana she conducted the 'mehndi' ritual on the 7th of Muharram and besides 'mehndi' prepared 'nyaz' for the occasion despite my father's hospitalization in Karbala. Her friends who were 'co zawars' always vouched for this incident.

Sadly, in Daressalaam due to ill health and old age she was bedridden most of the time. The cassettes of Murtaza Bandali with the old 'Masaebe Panjatan' marsias had great sentimental value for her and she would listen endlessly to them. Her selfless devotion to the services and azadari must get her marked out as an ardent azadar. In Zanzibar whenever the afternoon julus passed by our house she would hand an embroidered piece of cloth to me to be delivered to Maalim Mohamed Jivraj who led the julus. Here in Dsm the attendants at Mehfile Abbas would always send for laash and alam cloth to be embroidered or stitched and she derived immense satisfaction from this sacred performance.

Now her tape deck by the side of a window otherwise playing Husain Bandali's 'ghamka paigham leke aya ye mahe muharram...' is silent. The room is a sad reminder of her final hours when throughout the night she shivered. We kept around the clock vigil by her bedside. After the morning prayers I momentarily stood in the balcony to view the colour of the dawn sky of that fateful Monday morning and it looked grim and gloomy to me. The clock on the wall was ticking away. It struck seven. Her breathing was slowing down. We fed her with khake shafa and turned her bed towards qibla. We tried to nudge her but her breathing had stopped. She was absolutely still and there was a serene expression on her face. The doctor who had turned up the previous day was called. He pronounced her dead.

I tried to control myself and called my siblings abroad. I could not talk much as I choked on my words. Gradually the neighbours and relatives started to gather. A little later the hearse arrived from the mosque and the stretcher brought in. My mother who used to pray for me silently was parting from me. A terrific sadness overcame me as I saw her being laid into the stretcher and taken away

from the house. I felt completely helpless and could do nothing. My mother was gone forever. Nothing would ever be the same. Her bed was removed, her basket of medicine and other belongings taken away and bit by bit everything hers taken off. Gradually all signs of her began to vanish.

But to me her sweet smell stays in the room, the room that you saw on entering the house and where she would be lying on her bed and giving everybody her broad toothless smile. Right from the first night of Muharram she would attire herself in black till the 8th of Rabiulawwal. Whenever I went to the mosque for a Muharram majlis she would take out her money and give it to me for offering to shabih. She would be then anxiously awaiting my return when I handed her a jasmine plucked from its bunch placed on the shabih. I would then relate to her what the Zakir had recited and her eyes moistened. As a child I remember hearing the story of Karbala from her and playing with a cradle that she would make from her handkerchief whilst at the mosque. Years later in Dsm on Ashura day I remember fetching 'nyaz' for her from the mosque and then rushing home to serve it to her.

Alas my mother is gone. She was pious reciting daily a 'juzu' of Quran and finishing a 'khitma' every month. In the month of Ramadhan, she did as many as 6 to 7 'khitma'. In Zanzibar on a couple of instances in Muharram she had even published books on those days well liked 'nauha' in Gujarati and distributed them to her contacts. She was an avid and voracious reader of Gujarati literature. The two cupboards on the first floor of our house in Zanzibar were full of Gujarati magazines, periodicals and classic novels. A number of her friends and acquaintances came to our house at night to have their letters written by her. They expressed their thoughts and messages and she would jot down the contents in the letter.

She was a person of great humility and in particular very kind to the poor and downtrodden people. In Zanzibar, the ladies from 'bewakhana' that was located in our vicinity often came to our place to tell their woes to my mother and draw comfort from her sympathies and consolatory words. What was striking about her was the simplicity of her old way of life. The material world did not attract her at all. She preferred worn out clothes to the new ones which she gave away to the needy. Characteristics such as hypocrisy, diplomacy and sycophancy were alien to her. Her honesty was her excellent quality and recognized by everybody. In her heyday she was held in very high regard and responsible for fixing many couples into a holy matrimonial bliss. Furthermore, she embroidered the 'Imam Zamin' piece of cloth by inscribing 'Ya Ali' on it for the bride and the groom.

Besides Zanzibar she reminisced about her time spent in Kutch Mandvi and Jamnagar. That prompted my eventual visits to these places. An intriguing narrative of her anecdotes was her return to Zanzibar from Kutch Mandvi by dhow. When they were about to reach the shores of Mombasa their dhow was

trapped in a severe storm. The 'Maklo' (the crew leader) pleaded for forgiveness saying that nothing but a miracle could save them and requested them to offer prayers. Everyone was crying. In a dizzy and hazy state, she took out her 'mor' (clay tablet) and sprinkled 'khake shafa' over the traumatic Indian Ocean. After some time, the storm subsided. Indeed, it was a miracle. Eventually they reached Mombasa and later Zanzibar.

My mother was a treasure of traditional values with a profound knowledge of Khoja customs and traditions and having insight into the Zanzibar Khoja families right through the Kutch and Kathiavad days. She died at the ripe age but her mind was sound and sharp. Till her last days she used to tell us very vivid accounts of the past and her experiences. Her memory will linger forever. May Allah rest her soul with Eternal Bliss in the vicinity of 'Ahlulbait'.

People keep coming and eventually passing away, but the commemoration of Muharram goes on unabated. Soon the 'imambara' and 'azakahana' adorned with black cloth will display the glittering 'alams & shabihs', reminiscent of my mother's devotional involvement with it, and recount the episodic Karbala events befalling the martyred Imam 'YA HUSAIN'.

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