

OUR STORY

WE OWE IT TO OUR ELDERS



KHOJA
HERITAGE
PROJECT



PERSONAL INFORMATION

WHAT'S YOUR FIRST AND
LAST NAME?

Amirali Kermalli

WHERE DO YOU LIVE?
(CITY AND COUNTRY)

Fullerton, United States of
America

WHAT WAS YOUR CHILDHOOD LIKE?

I was born and raised in Zanzibar with my parents, Hassanali Dhala and Kulsum Kermalli, the third oldest of 12 children. That includes seven half-siblings, and we all were raised to be equally close to each other under my father and eldest brother. My mother died when I was three years old, and my aunt – my father's sister – helped raise us even after my father remarried. My stepmother became my new mother. "Msingi" is our family name and was the name of the building where my family lived and worked. It was common in those days of Zanzibar to be known by such family names.

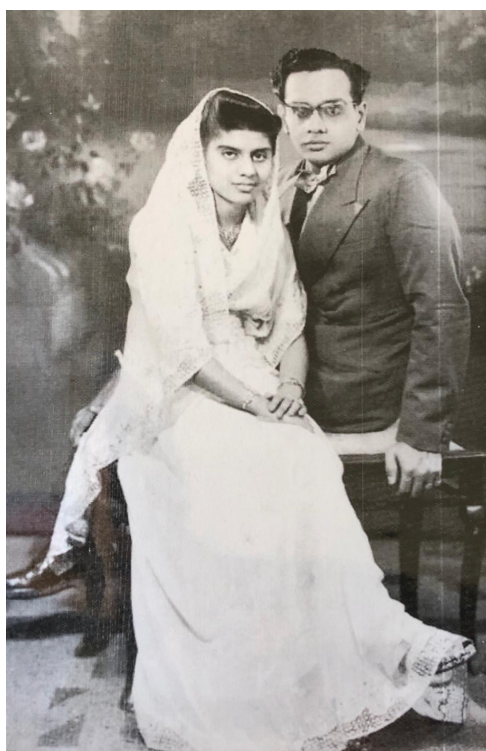


FUNNY EXPERIENCES FROM EARLY LIFE

Life in Zanzibar was a pleasure! I was always with my family and otherwise at school, Smith Madrasa. My favourite sport was volleyball, and I would play that at school along with cricket, table tennis, and badminton. Smith Madrasa was a government school where we were taught Gujarati, but English was my favourite subject. When I was young, I used to share a bedroom with my brother Ahmed. I have always been an immaculate person, even as a child, but my brother was not that way!

I used to walk to school as it was very close to home. I also had a bicycle that I was very proud of, and I would clean it meticulously every two weeks. I used to ride my bicycle in the evenings with my friends.

As a young man, I used to go to the “shamba,” the farm, on Sundays with my friends and talk “hadisi za zamani,” or old stories. Sometimes we would spend Saturday nights there.



MEMORIES OF PARENTS OR GRANDPARENTS

My life has been shaped by many family members, even beyond my grandparents and parents. This interview is my tribute to them, as they have all passed away. Their examples and love shaped the direction my family has taken today.

I will start with my grandparents: My maternal grandfather and grandmother were called Sivjee Jiwan and Sikina Sivjee Jiwan. My paternal grandfather, Dhala Kermalli, died early, and his three children and widowed wife worked at a shop or in small jobs to earn money. Their life was hard, and they were very poor. My paternal grandmother was called Bi Soni, and she used to live with us and go to the market for fish and vegetables for the whole house. She lived to be 107 years old. Bi Soni had a problem with one leg, so when she became older, she was always at home like a watchman. She eventually became blind, but all her other senses were keen and sharp, especially her excellent memory. My first child, Kulsum, was the first girl in our extended family's home. Bi Soni would call for my wife Rubab to bring the baby when she would cry so that Bi Soni could cradle her great-granddaughter to sleep.

One of my lasting wishes is that I could have known my mother, but she died in childbirth when I was very young. I have always prayed that I could see her in my dreams, to hear her voice or to see her face, but I never have. I know that she was a quiet, humble, and kind person. We named my first child after her and everyone said they are most alike. We called my father "Bha." He was a very good man and always took care of us. He was both jolly and strict at the same time! He was religious and also very innovative.

He used to order many useful things from England: he installed a light-up turn signal on my beloved bicycle, and called for me a unique, compact battery-operated light that I could use to recite nawha at the mosque on Ashura. Bha remarried after my mother passed away. He had a strict regimen that included sleeping early because he did not want to miss Namaz-e-Shab – I do not sleep so early, but like my father, I do that prayer daily. He would scold us to go to our rooms by 10 pm so we could have quality time with our wives – but we usually stayed up late to all socialize together! He kept a small electric plate (like a stove) near the dining table so that he could easily make his porridge at 6 am after he finished his morning prayers. After that, he would go to sleep for a short while and then go downstairs to the family business by 8 am. Our family owned and operated an electronics business, and we were an agent of the British company, GEC. My father was in partnership with his brother and their two oldest sons. My father worked and lived his whole life in Tanzania, and he and my mother are buried in Zanzibar.

My life was deeply influenced by my eldest brother, Anverali, who also played an instrumental role in my life as a caretaker and advisor. Bha Anver became a father figure to me and looked out for all of us. I would go to him for his opinion first, and then to my father, who rarely disagreed with Bha Anver. When my family left Zanzibar after the revolution, Bha Anver intervened as my father's trusted eldest son to advocate for my wife, children, and me to start a new life in Dubai. Ma Jena is my father's sister, who helped raise me. When we were young, we couldn't pronounce her name, Zainab, so this common nickname stuck (pronounced "nena"). I do not have sufficient words to capture how I feel about Ma Jena.



THE WORLD
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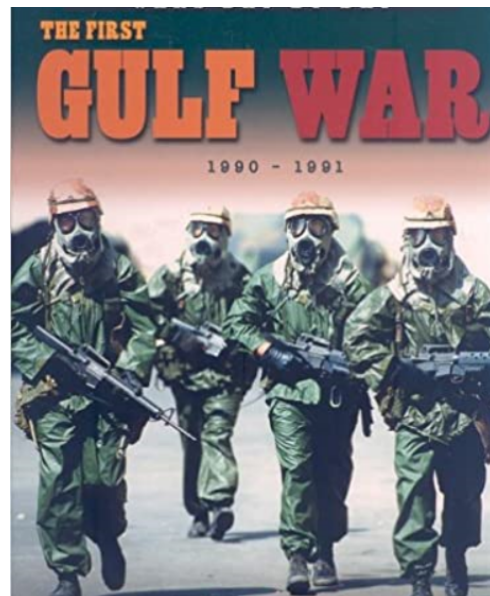
At a very young age, she divorced after eight months of marriage because her husband was abusing her and came to live with us, until her death. She never remarried and devoted her life to us after we lost our mother, and gave that same love to my children. My father respected his older sister very much. She had a small shop behind the house—a small room, really—and used to sell buttons, ribbons, and beads, and would roll cigarettes for her brothers. But she would not smoke! It was her duty in the kitchen to make all the mkate, including mkate wa mawele. In Ramadan, she would make all the sweets, including faluda or custard. Her other specialities were mkate wa ufuta and vi popo. My wife says that Ma Jena took care of all the women who were delivering babies in the home, including the wives of her nephews, even more than their own mothers would. Ma Jena worked hard her whole life, until her death at 79 years old.

SOME IMPORTANT HISTORICAL EVENTS OF LIFE



Imagine all the events that have taken place around the world for the past nearly 90 years! As a young child in Zanzibar, I remember that we were not allowed to put the lights on at night during World War II, and had to cover the windows with black cloths because Zanzibar was a British protectorate. We even created a way to diffuse our hanging light fixtures to dim their brightness. The whole town had to be dark for fear of aerial bombing. Fortunately, that never happened, but we often heard planes overhead, which we would learn later were friendly patrols. We had to live through food rations, also. The major event that forced many of us to leave East Africa eventually was the Zanzibar revolution of 1964. We relied on the radio for news, but generally, we had very little information coming into Zanzibar, especially during the revolution. It was a time of great fear and uncertainty, primarily to protect women from violence, and I had a wife and four young daughters.

When the revolution broke out, I had just bought a new car a week prior and had gone on a getaway with my friends to the shamba Revolutionaries, led by John Okello, rounded us up and imprisoned us in an outdoor yard at Rahalewo. We were kept there in crowded, cramped conditions with many others for two days without food. We were petrified and had no idea what was going to happen to us. By some good fortune, my brother's friend was a nurse who was working at the prison as a helper, and she recognized us. She was happy to see us and delivered the good news of our safety to my worried family, who were wondering what became of us. The new president of Zanzibar, Abeid Karume, came to Rahalewo and said we had been kept there for safety because people were being killed on the streets. Karume had us released and escorted us into town until we reached Forodhani, close to where the Msingi home was. I know others were not so fortunate during the revolution.



In 1991, after the Persian Gulf war began, my daughters, who were living in North America urged my wife and me to relocate from Dubai after living there for more than 20 years. For the second time in my life, I moved continents in just a few days.

MIGRATION INFORMATION

ABOUT HOW AND WHY LEFT HOME

After the revolution in 1964, my wife and daughters left Zanzibar in 1965 to Pakistan, where my parents-in-law had settled. I remained in Zanzibar with my father, my aunt Ma Jena, and some of my siblings and their families. It was quiet, and we were afraid to go out much in those post-revolution years, and many of my friends had left the island. While I felt lonely, I used to write letters to my wife and children every two weeks. These were hard times for the Msingi business because the government of Zanzibar was not allowing direct imports of British goods, like the electronics we used to sell, in favour of goods from China. The new government was also a bit disorganized, and I was having a lot of problems updating my passport to allow me to travel. Finally, in 1967, after not seeing them for two years, I went by ship to Pakistan to visit my wife and children – or so I thought. It was a beautiful and comfortable journey that took one week. My elder brother, Bha Anver, had also relocated to Karachi with his family. I did not like Karachi at all! A thief actually came into the house in Karachi when I was asleep and opened my suitcase! Luckily, there was very little of value to steal. I left Karachi after two weeks to visit Dubai, where two of my brothers were living. After arriving there, I found the place to be beautiful and safe and wanted to bring my family to remain there.

Jobs were emerging in Dubai after the discovery of oil. My wife said that she did not want to return to Zanzibar because she was uncomfortable with the insecurity there and wanted to better education opportunities for our girls. My father initially said that he would not give us his blessing, but my wife had won my eldest brother's support to advocate for my father's permission. My father's agreement was crucial to this plan working. Bha Anver told my father that, because all of the members of my household were women, any harm that may come to us would be my father's responsibility! I told you that my father trusted Bha Anver very much, and that convinced my father to let us go. I went back to Pakistan to collect my wife and two younger daughters, and we emigrated to the United Arab Emirates. Our two older children remained in Karachi because the school infrastructure was better. And so I didn't go back to Zanzibar from that "visit" after all.

YEAR OF IMMIGRATIONV- 1967

DEAR THINGS OR PEOPLE LEFT BEHIND

Most dear to me were the people I left behind: my parents, Bha and stepmother Bhabhi; and siblings, including my sisters Amina and Khadija. I had only my clothes with me, as I thought I would be returning, but that did not matter so much.



THE WORLD
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THE JOURNEY NOW

After the Persian Gulf War had broken out in 1990, and my oldest daughter Kulsum was living in Canada and had started to encourage my wife and me to consider moving from Dubai. Suddenly, at midnight one day in January 1991, Kulsum called us and said we had to leave right away because the Canadian government had allowed permission for us to relocate. We took a loan for the airline ticket, and after two days, left with just our clothes and basic necessities. My youngest daughter was living outside Dubai and wrapped up all of our affairs. It was incredibly hard to say goodbye to our lives there.

LIFE IN THE BEGINNING

My life after Zanzibar had two separate parts: Our life in Dubai, and later, our life in North America.

I lived in Dubai from 1967 to 1991. I liked enjoyed my life and work there very much. Dubai reminded me of Zanzibar, only with less access to the ocean! Initially, I tried to work with my brothers doing exports to India. We had some initial capital thanks to my father cashing out an insurance plan. Our shipments were not official, and sometimes those boats were captured. We were nervous but in need of income, but one day, our goods were seized in transit. My older brother Ahmed said that it was God's will, and after that point, I started applying for jobs. For 17 years, I worked seven days a week, from 6 am to 6 pm, at Mcdermott Oil Co. All four of my daughters married in Dubai and three ultimately left for North America.



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After leaving Dubai in 1991, my wife and I initially divided our time between Canada and the United States, with the U.S. becoming our primary residence. We also had long visits in London where my wife's parents and many siblings were. Life was very lonely for me initially, and for the first two years, I did not like America at all. I adjusted as the community in southern California developed more.

ADVICE FROM EXPERIENCE ON WHAT IT TAKES TO SETTLE IN A NEW PLACE

Take care of your future. If you have children, you must be careful to work hard so that you can earn what you need and ensure your livelihood.



WORK & HOW COMMUTE TO WORK

Yes, I worked until I moved to North America. In Zanzibar, my commute was only to go downstairs to the family business! In Dubai, I initially commuted by taxi. I bought a car after I had saved enough money.

HOW MANAGED FINANCIALLY

After leaving the comforts of Zanzibar, our funds were limited in Dubai. Initially, we had the benefit of monthly refugee rations of rice and sugar but were able to distribute those rations to others with greater need eventually. I worked seven days a week, and my wife Rubab finally secured a job in the Indian school as a teacher. While women in our family never worked in Zanzibar, this was a necessity in our new life. We couldn't afford air conditioning in those days, and it used to be so hot, we would change our bedsheets daily!

COMMUNITY SERVICE INFORMATION

COMMUNITY LIFE

The community represents a way to know each other, have good company, and socialize.

COMMUNITY LIFE IN THE EARLY DAYS SETTLED

I'll describe community life in Dubai. For a short time, we would hold gatherings in a small house, and then someone shared his Shi'a mosque for us to use before 10 pm called Al Ghadeer, frequented by members of the Pakistani community. For a long time, we were a few families from Zanzibar, maybe six or seven. I was so busy with work and would get so tired; we could not go out much anyway. But we would go to majlis on Thursday nights, as Friday was the weekend, and then more regularly during Muharram and Ramadan.

COMMUNITY LIFE IMPROVEMENT OVER THE YEARS

More people moved to Dubai from Uganda, Dar es Salaam, and Zanzibar and eventually, Khojas established their own mosque. I remember when Mulla Asghar came to speak to us and said the World Federation would provide funds to help, but that we must ensure the mosque not be empty. Local families also started collecting money. We also sold bricks for \$1 for fundraising!

VOLUNTEER IN OUR COMMUNITY - No

VOLUNTEER OUTSIDE OF THE COMMUNITY - No

FAVOURITE EXPRESSION OR PROVERB REALLY LIKED OR KNOWN TO USE OFTEN

I do not have one that comes to mind. I am deeply guided by my daily spiritual practice, including my dua's and prayers.



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ADVICE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Have a good life! Keep a focus on your faith and Islam. The way we live today, in these modern times, it can be so easy to let that slip away and forget our values. Never be indebted to anyone. You do not gain anything by holding a grudge so do not hold grudges with anyone in this world – let it go after three days! One of my main pastimes is to maintain close relationships with my family, and I always remember to send birthday greetings, including to my great-grandchildren (thanks to my daughter and her WhatsApp account!). I used to write letters regularly and still routinely make phone calls to check on family, especially on births, marriages, and the passing of loved ones. I feel happy when I do this, and even if it is not reciprocated, I think that I may be setting a positive example for others.

SOME PEOPLE THAT INSPIRED

My greatest inspiration is my own family, especially my four daughters and their families. My elder brother and father figure, Bha Anver, always had my most profound respect because our father gave him the authority to take care of us, and he always did.

ANYTHING ELSE

The happiest father-in-law in the world is Amir Kermalli! Alhamdulillah, I have a good family, and they take great care of me. My sons-in-law are more than sons to me in the way they care for my wife and me. They treat us just like their own parents, as do my grandchildren. Until today, I do not have any criticism about the way they respect both of us. I always pray for them and my four daughters, that Allah gives them good health and long lives.

