

# KHOJA SHIA ITHNA-ASHERIS IN LAMU AND MOMBASA, 1870-1930

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BY  
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*Author's Note:*

A chance meeting outside Fort Jesus, Mombasa, with Cynthia Salvadori, author of the remarkable three volume *We Came in Dhows*, was what first inspired me to record stories and anecdotes about Ithna-Asheri pioneers at the turn of the century. Cynthia was fortunate enough to interview late Hussein Abdalla Jaffer and late Gulamali G.A. Dato; scions of two pioneer Ithna-Asheri families of Mombasa. I decided to carry on where she left off and began to interview as many old members of the community as I could. Of course I never intended to nor indeed was it possible to record every story. The few I did are published here along with historical notes, photographs and newspaper clippings.

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## Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheris in Lamu and Mombasa, 1870-1930



*Dewji Jamal*  
(from Hussein A. Jaffer)

*Lamu-* In about 1870, Dewji Jamal, a rich Ithna-Asheri merchant of Bombay and Zanzibar established a branch of his company Dewji Jamal & Co in Lamu which was then the chief port of Kenya. Besides this solitary venture there is no record of Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheris on the island until 1880. The period 1880-1890 witnessed a large number of Ithna-asheri arrivals in Lamu.

Most of the new arrivals came from Kutch or Kathiawad but some also came from older Khoja settlements along the East African coast like Bagamoyo, Zanzibar and Kilwa.

When they arrived most were already “Ithna-Asheri” and it is likely that only a very small number of Khojas actually seceded in Lamu. Late Hussein Abdalla Jaffer, a great-grandson of Dewji Jamal remembers that while his grandfather Jaffer Dewji was in Lamu he often used to help Ismaili Khojas and invite them for religious majlises. After some time a number of them left the jamatkhana and joined the Ithna-Asheris.<sup>1</sup>

In 1883 seven sons of Kanji Asani left Jamkhabalia (near Jamnagar) in Kathiawad and arrived in Lamu after a forty day journey by dhow. Of the seven, five, Dewji Kanji, Daya Kanji, Panju Kanji, Samji Kanji, Ramji Kanji became Ithna-asheris. Each of the brothers established shops in Lamu town from where they carried out a flourishing import export business. A great grandson of Dewji Kanji, Jafferali Merali, who was born in Lamu in 1919, describes the family business:

“At that time Lamu did a great deal of trade, with Mombasa, Somalia and direct to India. The dhows anchored off Lamu town, and the steamers anchored off Shela. One of our main exports was the doum palm mat bags that were used in Zanzibar for packing cloves. Another was mangrove poles which went to the Gulf countries. We imported mainly rice, sugar, wheat and spices.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1885 one of Dewji Jamal’s sons, Nazerali Dewji, arrived in Lamu with his family from Zanzibar. A handwritten letter by John Kirk, the British Consul in Zanzibar, to his deputy in Lamu announces the new arrivals:

“I have been asked to mention to you that Nazerali Deoji [sic] and his family have gone to settle in Lamu, and to say that he is the Agent of Deoji Jamal [sic] of this place, a British Indian. Also I would say that the family of Deoji Jamal including his Agent now at

<sup>1</sup> From an interview with Hassan A.M.Jaffer.

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Salvadori, “Muharram in Lamu from an interview with Jafferali Merali”, *We Came in Dhows* v.1 ( Paperchase Kenya Ltd: Nairobi, 1996), 30-31

Lamu have formally left the Khoja sect and joined that of the K.Shias. They are still however British subjects. For leaving the Khojas the family has sometimes been annoyed by their former co-religionists.”<sup>3</sup>

The ‘family’ mentioned in the letter probably also included two of Nazerali Dewji’s younger brothers, Nasser Dewji and Jaffer Dewji, who were sent to manage the branch of Dewji Jamal & Co on the island. In 1887 Nazerali Dewji moved to Mombasa to establish a new branch of Dewji Jamal & Co.

Because Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheris arriving in Lamu came with their families by 1895 the population of Khoja Shia Ithna-asheris had increased to about three hundred. Initially the Ithna-asheris met at individual homes to perform the ‘majlis’, ‘matam’ and other communal observances. In 1896 Dewji Jamal bought land for building a mosque-imambara. The Jamat meanwhile established a fund to raise the capital required to erect the mosque-imambara. Nasser Dewji supervised the construction and played a leading role in the collection efforts.<sup>4</sup>

In the same year Jaffer Dewji left for Mombasa to manage the Mombasa branch of Dewji Jamal & Co. Soon after Jaffer Dewji’s departure the Lamu Khoja Shia Ithna-asheri community plunged into a decade of communal discord. The internal factionalism which gripped the Lamu jamat in those days was not uncommon. The jamats at Zanzibar, Mombasa and Dar-es-Salam all faced similar challenges. Often in such cases social conflict resulted in the acquisition of new land for use as a cemetery or the building of new mosques and imambaras. This in turn helped to meet the demands of an increase in the size of the community once the conflict was resolved and the jamat was again reunited.



*Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Mosque, Lamu, Kenya (Photo by Author)*

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Salvadori, *We Came in Dhows*, 30.

<sup>4</sup> In 1901 Nasser Dewji died onboard a German ship while returning from pilgrimage to Mecca and was buried at sea.

In Lamu shortly after the conflict began, one faction, with the help contributions from Zanzibar, built a temporary new mosque outside the 1896 mosque-imambara. This was later re-built in the 1900's with contributions from Jivraj Khatau, Jivraj Meghji and others who had left Mombasa's "Bustani" (see below) into the splendid mosque that can be seen today on the Lamu the sea front. When the Lamu jamat reunited, this mosque became its main mosque, while the top floor of the older 1896 mosque-imambara was now used exclusively as an imambara. In the 1920's and 30's the population of the Lamu jamat began to decline steadily. By the end of the Second World War most Khojas had migrated to Mombasa. One reason for the migration was that Mombasa had displaced Lamu as the chief commercial port of Kenya. Another reason was the lack of adequate higher education facilities in Lamu, though it must be said the community did make efforts in this regard when Jiwan Visram established a school-madrassa on the island in the 1890's.

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*Waljee Hirjee*  
(from C. Salvadori)

*Mombasa* - Khoja settlement in Mombasa dates to 1867 when Waljee Hirjee a prominent Khoja Ismaili merchant of Zanzibar opened a shop at the Old Port. The first Ithna-asheri to settle in Mombasa was Abdalla Datoos Hirjee. He arrived on the island from Zanzibar in 1882. In 1887 Nazerali Dewji left Lamu and moved to Mombasa to manage a branch of Dewji Jamal & Co. and in 1896 he was followed by his brother Jaffer Dewji.

The numbers of Khojas on the island at the time was small. In 1887 the combined Khoja population (both Ismailis and Ithna-Asheris) on the island was estimated at only twenty five compared to around 1,900 in Zanzibar and 385 in Bagamoyo. With the establishment of the Imperial British East African Company (IBEA) in 1888, Mombasa became the chief commercial entrepôt of East Africa. Large numbers of Khojas began to arrive from the old mercantile centres of Zanzibar, Bagamoyo, Lamu and Kilwa; others came directly from India. Khojas who had already established firms in Zanzibar, Bagamoyo or Lamu decided to open branches or shift altogether to Mombasa.

For example, in 1893 Dharamsi Khatau called his brother Jivraj Khatau from India to manage a branch of Dharamsi Khatau & Co in Mombasa. Also at this time two famous Bagamoyo merchant princes, Allidina Visram and his Ithna-asheri nephew Nasser Virji decided to shift their businesses to Mombasa and opened branches in 1895 and 1900 respectively.



As Edward Rodwell notes Mombasa was not much of a place in those days. Ndia Kuu and Vasco Da Gama St (now Mbarak Hinaway St) comprised the main streets. The town boasted few stone buildings. Most of the island was covered by jungle, infested with puff-adders, and leopards roamed about the town at night. Every now and then lions would walk over the ford at Makupa when the tide was low. In 1892 Mombasa was the scene of a celebrated lion hunt in the area where Mombasa Sports Club is now situated. The business of the town was in the hands of a small group of Bhattias, Bohras, Memons and Khojas.



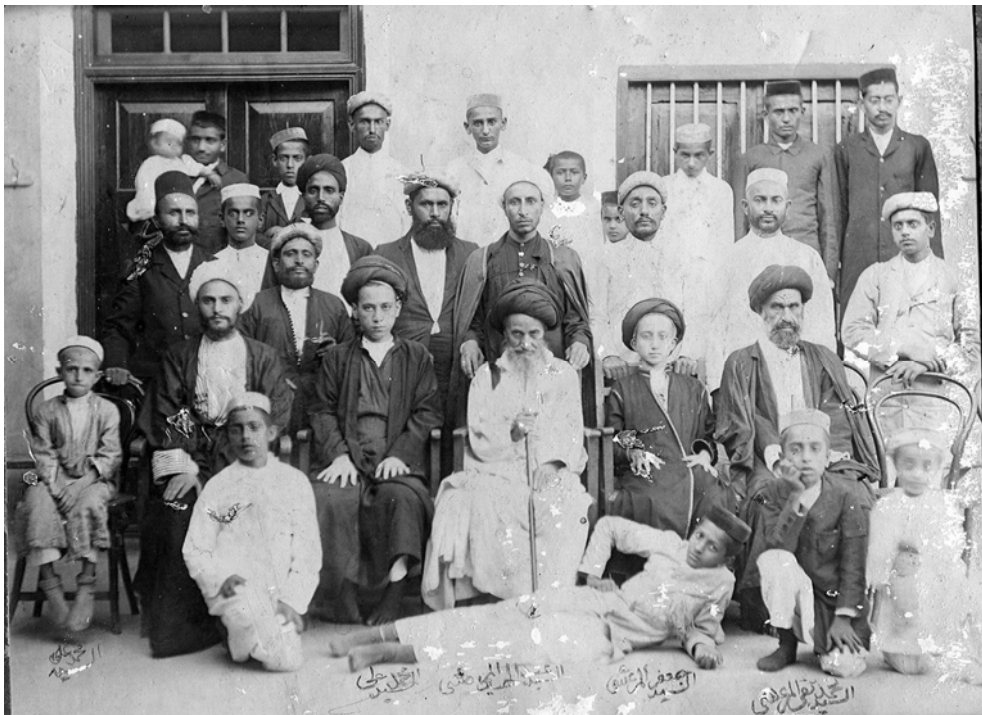
*Mombasa, Ndia Kuu, 1895*

As the Khoja Shia Ithna-asheri population on the island increased – by 1897 it had grown to about a hundred – arrangements were made to meet at individual houses to perform the ‘majlis’, ‘matam’ and other communal rituals. In 1897 Dewji Jamal & Co bought a shamba called “kitumba” with a small bunaglow from Maryam bint Mohamed bin Mbarak Karooso for use as a cemetery. Two years later in 1899 the community decided to build a mosque and imambara. The mosque-imambara was built on a shamba (in Persian “bustan”) worth five thousand rupees belonging to Dewji Jamal & Co. A fund was established and a small mosque-imambara was built which became known as “Bustani” (now Hyderi). Unfortunately towards the end of the same year the Mombasa Khoja Shia Ithna-asheris became caught up in the ongoing communal discord and conflict in Zanzibar and Lamu.

According to late Sadak Jivraj Meghji soon after the differences arose a small bungalow was purchased near the Bustani. The disaffected party would gather there to perform namaz and majlis. A madrasa under the charge of a Seyyid Rhemtulla was established to teach the Quran and the Seyyid was paid fifteen rupees a month for his services. However after a year the madrasa was stopped and religious activities were shifted to the

house of Mohammed Baqir, a Persian gentleman living in Mombasa. Eventually the leaders of the new Jamat decided to acquire their own cemetery and build a new mosque-imambara.

In 1900 Dharamsi Khatau, Jivraj Khatau and Walji Bhanji bought land along present day Haileselassie Rd for use as a cemetery. Three years later in 1903, Dharamsi Khatau, Jivraj Khatau and Jivraj Meghji bought land along Old Killindini Rd and a fund was established to build a new mosque-imambara. In 1904 work on the mosque-imambara, named “Kuwwatul Islam” (now Husseini) was completed. Various dignitaries from Zanzibar were invited for the opening ceremony including the resident alim of Zanzibar Seyyid Abdulhusein Marashi who performed the religious ceremony of dedication. Henceforth the Ithna-asheri community of Mombasa had two jamats: “Bustani” and “Kuwwatul Islam” each with their own mosque-imambara and cemetery. As luck would have it the two cemeteries, although separated from each other by a wall, were right next to each other. When the two jamats were reunited on 28 October 1966 under the famous slogan “ek bano nek bano” (be one and good), the wall between the two cemeteries (known then as the “Berlin Wall”), was finally brought down.



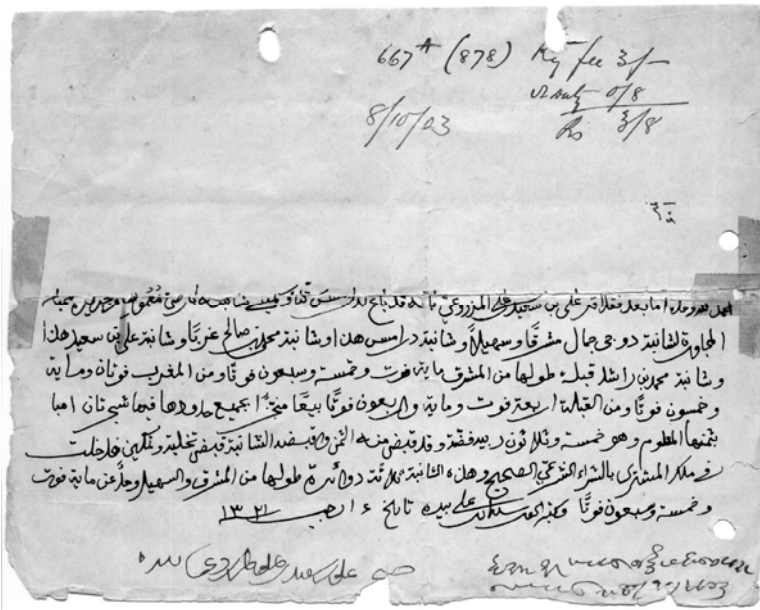
1904, Mombasa - Visiting dignitaries from Zanzibar at the opening ceremony of the “Kuwwatul Islam Mosque” on Old Killindini Rd. (from Sayyid Muhammad Redha Shushtary).

Sitting (from L-R second row): Sayyid Muhammad Ali (first l); Sayyid Muhammad Ali (third l); Sayyid Abdulhusein Marashi (centre); Sayyid Jaffer Marashi (second r); Sayyid Muhammad Taqi Marashi (first r); Standing (third row R-L): Ali Mohammed Jagani, (unkown), Ismail Kalyan.



1904, Mombasa - Visiting dignitaries from Zanzibar at the opening ceremony of the "Kuwwatul Islam Mosque" on Old Killindini Rd. (from Akbarali A. Khatau)

Sitting on the ground: Bandali Kanji (fourth from l); Abdul Hussein (A.H.) Nurmohamed (fifth from l); Mohammed Sadak Jivraj Meghji (first from r); sitting first row: Dharamsi Khatau (first from l); Alimohamed Jagani is standing behind Dharamsi Khatau; Pira Valli (centre with curved stick, first president of Kuwwatul Islam Jamat of Zanzibar in 1882); Sayyid Abdulhusein Marashi (first resident alim of Zanzibar Kuwwatul Islam Jamat); Mulla Abdalla Saleh Sachedina is standing behind Sayyid Abdulhusein Marashi's left shoulder; a bespectacled Ali Sachedina is behind Mulla Abdalla Saleh; Standing back row: Ismail Kalyan (fifth from l); Jivraj Khatau (sixth from l); Kassamali Jivraj Meghji (seventh from l); Mohamed Valli Dharsi (third from r).



Original Shaban 1318/1900 Arabic Deed of Sale of a plot of land for the cemetery to Dharamsi Khatau & Co. next to the shamba of Dewji Jamal (from A.A. Khatau)

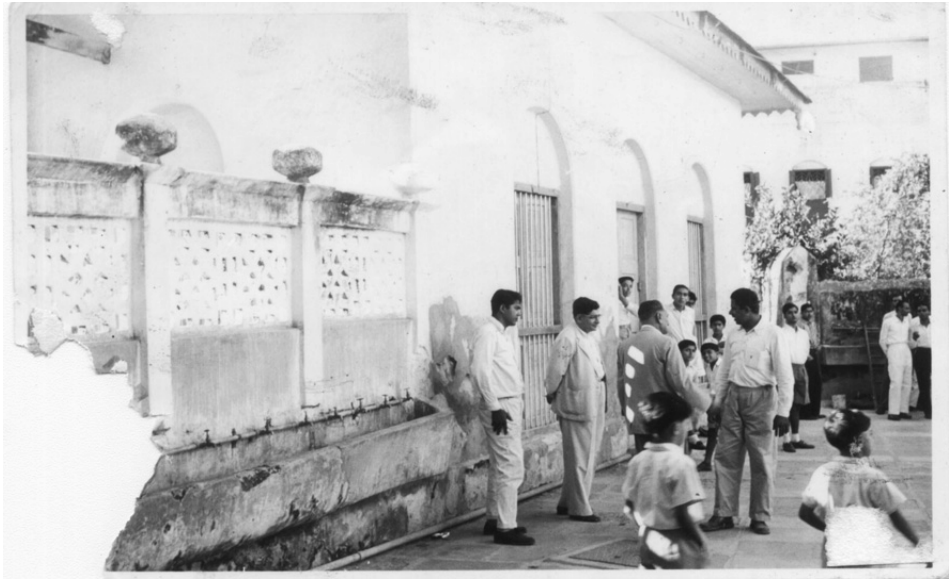




*Early 1900's - Mombasa Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheris. Note the Union Jack flying in the background. (from A.A. Khatau)*



*The "Berlin Wall" being brought down by representatives of the two jamats: Abdulhussein Dharamsi Khatau and Sadak Jivraj Meghji (from A.A. Khatau)*



*The Old Bustani (from A.A. Khatau)*

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*“Chittilessso”*

Hanging on a wall at the entrance of the Mombasa Club there used to be a superb black and white photograph of a sailing dhow. On the dhow’s stern, you could read the legend “W. RAMJI & SONS, LAMU, L.58”. The dhow belonged to old Walji Ramji a leading Ithna-Asheri piece-cloth merchant of Lamu. He arrived on the island in 1885 along with his brothers Molu Ramji and Damji Ramji.



The three brothers built up a flourishing business retailing and wholesaling cotton cloth. When they were tired of sitting in their shops they used to go door to door to make deliveries. They became famous under the name “chittilessso”, a name which is still remembered by old residents of Lamu to this day. (Chit is the Gujarati word for cotton and lessso is a type of cloth wrap around worn by Swahili women)

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### *Life in Lamu*

From Interviews with Hussein Abdalla Jaffer Pardhan (AP)

Life in Lamu in the 1930's was very simple. People would wake up in the morning and go for prayers. They would open their shops from 8:00-12:00pm and then go home for lunch and to sleep. The shops would re-open again at 3:00pm until 6:00pm when people would go for maghrib prayers. After dinner some people would open their shops at half past eight to do book keeping until around 10:00pm when they would go to bed. The chairmen of the jamat in those days were Jaffer Panju, Hassan Walji, Molu Ramji and his brother Walji Ramji. Molu Ramji used to bring grain and other cargo from Mombasa and would export boriti (mangrove poles).

Yes I remember Daya Kanji. He had a big shop in Lamu and was also into bringing cargo from Mombasa and shipping boriti and copra. Daya Kanji's agent Abdulrasul Hirji Walji stayed in Faza where he would buy boriti. The Bohra Adamali Nurbhai and the Parsi Cowasjee were also in Faza. They used to come to Lamu once every six months for a hair cut.

There was no electricity in the mosque; we had to use kerosene lamps. The imambara was upstairs. There were two ways of going up to the imambara; one way was from the bazaar and this was used by the ladies and the other was from the sea shore which was used by gents. Two staircases were built on either side. The local mullas were Mulla Jaffer Ali, Mulla Vallimohamed Merali Dewji, Mulla Mohammedali Nanji and Mulla Nanji Bhanji, who was a very old man at the time. The mullas would give waez and majlis in the imambara upstairs from the wooden minbar. Later on we used to have alims coming from outside Lamu. They would stay in the madrasa at the top which was converted into a guesthouse when there weren't any children left.

The purdah was strictly enforced in those days in Lamu. There was a wall with a wooden door in the middle of the imambara that was always closed. Next to the door was a window like the one in our mosque in Zanzibar. During niyyaz which was always at lunch time if the ladies needed anything extra they used to tap the window's sill. Mwalimu Yusufu and Mwalimu Faraj used to teach the students Quran in the madrasa. On Thursday nights we would all go to the Chungani. Majlises were held there in the small building (now in ruins) with barazas outside. This building was built during the time of Molu Ramji. The oldest graves you can see in the Lamu Chungani today are of Daya Kanji, Damji Ramji, Molu Ramji, Walji Ramji, Alibhai Panju and Jaffer Panju.

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### *Dhows I Can Remember*

From interviews with Hussein Abdalla Jaffer Pardhan (AP)

Walji Ramji was known as "chittiless" and he was a big piece cloth merchant. He used to own a number of dhows. I remember "Sadat el-

Khayr”; “Kheya” which disappeared while sailing from Lamu to Mombasa and “Violet” which also disappeared even though many inquiries into its whereabouts were made. The three brothers Hassan Walji, Rhemtulla Walji and Hirji Walji were into importing grain and taking cargo to Mombasa, Tanga and Dar-es-Salaam. Hassan Walji had dhows as well. I remember “Madina”, “Munawer” and “Rangoon”. Mulla Nanji Bhanji’s dhow was “Ruman”.

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*Two Brave Brothers*

From the “Ithna-Asheri Trade Directory”

Not all Khoja families that came to Lamu actually lived on the island. A number of people were based in Kunumbi and Witu on the mainland; others in Faza and Siyu on Pate island. The leaders of the Bhimji Kanji family are an example. Hassan Bhimji and Hirji Bhimji lived in Mpeketoni on the banks of the Tana River. They would travel along the river in dug out canoes or “hodis” to remote villages negotiating crocodiles, hippos and native tribes to trade.

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*Cosmopolitan Lamu*

From interviews with Hussein Abdalla Jaffer Pardhan (AP)

Yes I do remember something about other communities. The Ismailis in Lamu in the 1930’s I remember are Velji Khatau, Mohan Amersi and his brother Remtulla (Remu) Amersi and Lalji Rajan. There were many Bohras. T.M.Jeevanjee had the biggest dhow in Lamu called “Queen Mary”. The dhow sank on its first trip to Kismayu loaded with boriti. Other Bohras were Ibrahimji Moosajee, Amijee Ismailjee, Sadiqali Nurbhai, Gulamhussein Nurbhai, Pirbhai Nurbhai, Gulamhussein Daya, Hassanali Zahabu who used to sell gold, Ismail Kichwa, Alibhai Mauritiuswalla who had a big building in Lamu and Gulamhussein “Belwed” who was lame and moved about on one foot.

Among the Sunni community I remember Haji Mohammed Karim Khatri and his brother Haji Gulmohammed Karim Khatri. There were two barber shops in Lamu, the oldest being Sidik Ahmed’s and the other one was Hasham’s. The old Hindus were Jevant Dossa, Vallabhdas Valji who was a Bhattia and his brother Morarji Valji. They would burn their dead in Kitau opposite Shela. There was a bar near the Lamu Customs owned by a Goan, Mr.Vagasse. The Parsis I remember in Lamu were the two sons of Cowasjee Nowrojee Dastur, Keki and his brother Homi. Among Arabs I remember Shaykh Mohammed Maa’wy who had mango shambas, Salim Ahmed Basaida who worked with Smith Mackenzie, Hussein Shamuti, Abdalla Bathes and Mr. Yahya who was the only man in Lamu with a horse. He used to ride it on the main street along the sea shore.

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## *Ivory and Sim Sim*

There is an interesting letter in the Zanzibar Archives from the British Consular Agency in Lamu to the Customs Officer in Lamu. Dated 1890, it is a petition filed by one “Hemraj Luddha” complaining about extra charges he was asked to pay for a consignment of sim sim seed and ivory that he had brought by dhow from Mambui. According to Luddha, despite paying full customs fees for the sim sim seed and the ivory at Mambui, the Lamu customs had retained the ivory and demanded extra payment of duty.

Could Hemraj Luddha be the Ithna-asheri merchant Hemraj Ladhani? I am inclined to think so. Erratic spelling of tricky Indian names was common in the Consular Agency. If those inscrutable clerks could turn the famous Zanzibari merchant Fazal Issani into ‘Fazal Isa,’ Hemraj Luddha is probably none other than Hemraj Ladhani. In 1880 Hemraj Ladhani sailed with his family by dhow from Kutch to Bagamoyo. Around 1885 he moved with his family to Lamu. Hemraj Ladhani had five sons: Virji Hemraj; Abdalla Hemraj; Rashid Hemraj; Bandali Hemraj and Hassam Hemraj all of whom were well known in Lamu as ‘Bagamoyowallas’.

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### *Dharamsi Khatau: A Pioneer and Merchant Prince*

From interviews with Akberali A. Khatau

My grandfather Dharamsi Khatau was born in Nagalpur, Kutch in 1865. He had four brothers Jivraj Khatau, Manji Khatau, Kassim Khatau and Killu Khatau. Yes it’s the same “shaheed” Killu Khatau, the student of Mulla Qader Husayn who was martyred in Bombay. After the death of Killu in 1878, my grandfather left Bombay in 1880 with his father and mother along with the wife of Killu Khatau and Killu’s daughters. The journey to Mombasa by dhow took about a month. On the way Khatau Nanjani, my great-grandfather saddened by the death of Killu passed away. He was lowered into the sea with full honours.



*Dharamsi Khatau  
(from A.A. Khatau)*

When the dhow arrived in Mombasa, Dharamsi Khatau decided to stay on board and disembark in Zanzibar. In Zanzibar he established Dharamsi Khatau & Co., which grew to become a successful import company that used to import textiles from Germany. It had forty branches throughout East Africa, in Mombasa, Lamu, Malindi, Mazaras, Takangu, Kisumu, Bukoba, Nairobi and Meru etc. Many Ithna-Asheri pioneers began working with Dharamsi Khatau & Co before establishing their own businesses including Rashid Moledina, Abdalla Kanji, Rashid Nurmohammed of Kampala, Moledina Virji and Ali Mohammed Jagani.



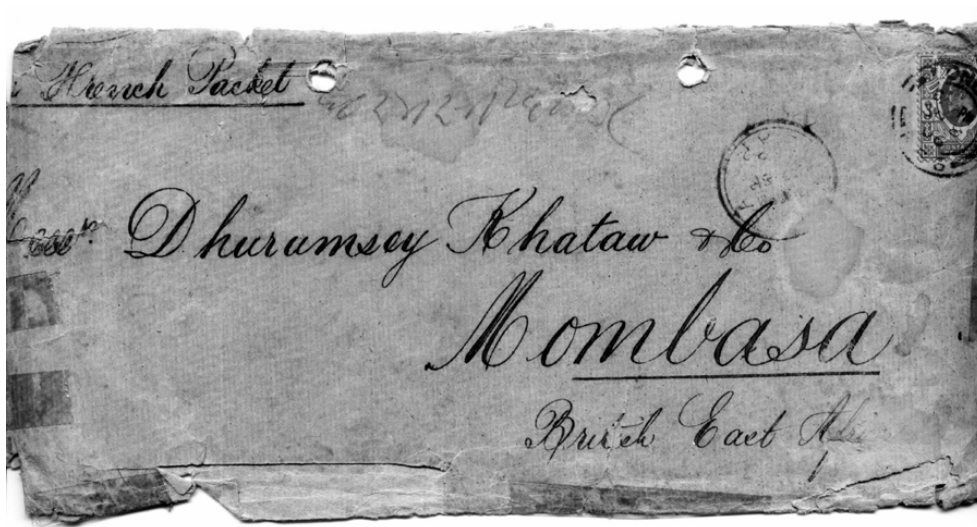
In 1893 my grandfather called his brother Jivraj Khatau to manage the Mombasa branch of Dharamsi Khatau & Co. It was Jivraj who extended the company's business deep into the interior. There is an interesting incident that my father told me about Jivraj Khatau. One day Walji Bhanji was delayed in paying for goods bought from the German firm Messrs. Hansing & Co. He was sent a notice threatening court action. When the news reached Jivraj Khatau, he became very angry and told the firm's German representative: "Walji Bhanji is my brother." Later that day the notice was torn up by the German in Jivraj's office. The Germans knew if they didn't take the notice back all business dealings between Dharamsi Khatau & Co. and Messrs. Hansing & Co. would stop. You see, that's how it used to be in the old days.



*Jivraj Khatau  
(from A.A.  
Khatau)*



*Messrs. Hansing & Co.  
Mombasa  
(from Playne and Gale)*



*An old envelope: the remains of a business empire  
(from A.A. Khatau)*

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*The First Ithna-Asheri in Nairobi*

From Cynthia Salvadori's *We Came in Dhows* and interviews with Mulla Anverali Valimohamed Walji and late Hussein A. Walji

Walji Bhanji was born in Kutch in 1869. He had two brothers Khaku Bhanji and Karim Bhanji. After Khaku's death, Walji Bhanji married his brother's wife Kaiserbai and raised his brother's children Suleman Khaku and Bachibai. Kaiserbai bore him two sons Alibhai and Valimohammed. In 1898 Walji Bhanji left Kutch and arrived with his family in Mombasa. He stayed with Ladha Kanji and opened a small shop selling matches and tobacco. In 1899 he decided to go to Nairobi. He travelled by train to Voi and then by donkey to Nairobi. Very quickly Walji Bhanji was able to establish a successful import-export firm. The firm grew to almost sixty branches across East Africa. There was even a branch in Nakuru opened in 1902 and supervised by Karim Bux.

The firm used to import piece goods and salt from India, sugar from Mauritius and would export raw cotton and from 1909 onwards ivory to India and the Far East. Walji Bhanji's sons Valimohammed and Alibhai and his step son Suleman were made partners in the firm. It was Suleman who extended the firm's operation into the interior. Cotton ginneries were set up in Mbale and Butiaba. Walji Bhanji himself stayed mostly in Mombasa, Valimohammed worked in Zanzibar and Alibhai was in charge of buying ivory.

There was a time when Walji Bhanji was so famous amongst the Africans that they were singing songs about him as they pushed the handcarts bringing cotton and ivory to the depots. At first the family lived in Walji Bhanji's buildings on Old Killindini Rd but later Walji Bhanji acquired the big house (Leven House) near the stairs by the Old Port and the whole family lived there. The ground floor was the head office with all the accountants and everybody. On the top floor Suleman lived with his family.

Eventually Walji Bhanji's luck ran out. The Great Depression hit Africa – and Walji Bhanji lost a lot of currency, German marks. Smith Mackenzie advanced him a large sum to purchase the cotton crop. Locusts devoured the entire crop. In 1932 he was declared bankrupt. All Walji Bhanji's properties were put up for sale. Datoo came to auction them. For three days after the auction Walji Bhanji never left the house, his big house by the Old Port. On the third day, there in that house he died.



*Walji Bhanji*  
(from Hussein A. Walji)

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