

# MEMOIRS OF A MUHINDI



# Memoirs of a Muhindi

*Fleeing East Africa for the West*

MANSOOR LADHA



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SASKATCHEWAN

*This book is dedicated to the people  
of Tanzania for their support  
and friendship during my early years  
and  
to the people of Canada for accepting  
immigrants, minorities, and refugees  
and allowing them to make their  
new homes in Canada.*



## *Diaspora*

IF YOU CALL YOURSELF A FRENCH-CANADIAN, INDO-Canadian, Irish-Canadian, German-Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, African-Canadian, or any other hyphenated-Canadian, then you are part of the worldwide diaspora.

In Greek, the word diaspora means “to scatter,” but today we use the term to describe a community of people who live outside their shared country of origin or ancestry but maintain active connections with it. A diaspora includes both emigrants and their descendants. While some people lose their attachment to their ancestral homeland, others maintain a strong connection to a place their ancestors may have left generations ago.

Over the last forty-five years, the number of people living outside their country of origin has almost tripled—from 76 million to more than 232 million. More than 3 percent of the world’s population now lives outside of the country where they were born. If migrants made up a single nation, it would be the fifth largest in the world.

—*International Diaspora Engagement Alliance*  
(adapted)



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## Preface

DURING MY LAST YEARS IN AFRICA, ASIANS WERE INCREASINGLY scared to put their thoughts on paper for fear of reprisal. “Tomorrow they will come and put us in jail” was a commonly stated fear. The British colonial authorities didn’t encourage freedom of speech, but following independence the situation became worse. When African governments took over, they established one-party systems, banning other political parties—a clear indication they didn’t want any alternative views.

Today, most of these African-born Asians reside in Western countries, where they enjoy freedom of speech under charters of rights. Their contribution to our democratic discourse, however, is slowly and gradually disappearing. The Asians who were forced to flee colonial Africa are dying with each passing year. The stories of

what they lived through, what they had to give up for freedom, are being lost. Therefore, those of us who are left, we old-timers, need to share our experiences, our persecution, our knowledge—it is our history.

As a group, Asians in East Africa kept to themselves and were a close-knit community. The three-tiered British colonial order kept the races segregated in schools and in residential areas: the British on top, the Asians in the middle, and the black Africans at the bottom; socially, the three peoples hardly interacted before independence.

Many Asians also do not drink alcohol—often a prerequisite to social intermingling in a modern society. In East Africa, cocktail parties at sunset, or sundowners, were common among government departments, diplomatic embassies, and private companies. Hence, Asians were left out of the inner circle of the decision-making echelons of society. Also, among the Asians, Muslims are forbidden to eat pork, while Hindus do not eat beef—additional social barriers.

But despite these handicaps, the sons and daughters of the coolies who built the railways in Africa, the Asian entrepreneurs who opened up the interior, and the traders whose spirit of free enterprise brought them to the shores of Zanzibar made an immense contribution as a whole. The result—a thriving and prosperous

Asian community in East Africa—was the envy of the African majority.

Despite their contribution, economically and commercially, it is unfortunate that no matter how hard they tried, no matter how strong their urge to belong, that desire remained unfulfilled and the Asians had to leave the countries where many of them had been born. No matter how hard they tried to identify themselves with the countries of their birth, to build bridges and seek oneness with the Africans, their brown skin—and perhaps their success—got in the way. The Africans rejected the Asians, viewing them with suspicion and prejudice. Despite perhaps having lived in East Africa for generations, they were seen as people without a country, without a home.

Not much is written about East Africa's Asians by East African-born Asian writers. As such, there is a need for us to write about our experiences in Africa, our accounts of our childhood, our community, and the hardships our ancestors and our families had to undergo.

Thus, as an East African Asian, and especially as a journalist, I felt compelled to write my memoirs, to tell the story of a descendant of immigrants, brown in colour, living in a black society (Tanzania), who later became a brown immigrant living in a white society (Canada). I hope to shed light on the experiences felt by immigrants,

the challenges of cross-cultural differences, the hurt of discrimination, and other hardships of displacement.

Most books on Africa inevitably have a political theme, and usually they are written against a backdrop of upheaval, poverty, and violence. As someone born in Africa, I'll never forget my childhood, my neighbourhoods, my school, my classmates, my friends, and my teachers. I loved Tanzania and was willing to die for it, but the circumstances to stay were not in my favour and, regrettably, I had to leave the country of my birth. However, the love for my motherland will live with me forever. As they say, despite everything, a man never forgets where he was born.

As a friend graciously offered, my personal story "illuminates the larger political and cultural backdrop of the so-called post-colonial period in Africa." Yes, what follows is a memoir, but the best memoir brings not merely a life to the page but also the surrounding historical and cultural forces that moved that life. A memoir is at its best when that personal-within-the-historical balance is kept in ways that make it both compelling (because we empathize with the storyteller) and informative (because the personal story is also the story of nations and people in a particular time and place). I hope I have succeeded in discharging that duty.

## Acknowledgements

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I am indebted as well to my former classmate and friend Ashok Patel, who studied with me at the Lindi Indian Public School in Tanzania, for providing material for the chapter on Lindi. I also must acknowledge that

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earlier versions of some chapters and various excerpts have been previously published in my regular columns in the *Calgary Herald* and *Vancouver Sun* newspapers.

My sincere thanks also go to editor David McLennan, managing editor Donna Grant, and copy editor Alison Jacques for their insightful comments and sharp editing. *Asante sana*, David, Donna, and Alison. (Thanks very much.)

Lastly, some of the names in this book have been deliberately changed to safeguard those individuals' privacy, and it is my hope I have not embarrassed anyone.

## Colonial Africa

THE PHONE RANG IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, DISTURBING the silence in the three-storey building in the Malindi area of Zanzibar. Who could it be at this time of the night? It could be bad news.

Nervously, he picked up the receiver from his bedside table: "Hello."

"Count Sahib, *mubaraki* [Count Sir, congratulations]. You have a grandson," the matron of Jessa Bhaloo Maternity Home in Zanzibar said, congratulating my grandfather, Count Ebrahim Ladha. My grandfather was extremely pleased at the news. He had waited for this moment for a very long time. Any hopes and dreams he'd had of an heir for his little kingdom had been unfulfilled due to the lack of a male offspring. Several years after my parents' marriage, I was later told, the matter was so

crucial that my grandmother had even suggested that Dad divorce my mom and remarry in order to produce an heir.

However, as it turned out, a grandson was born—six years after the marriage of Hassanali, his oldest son and my father, to beautiful Zera, my mother. And that grandson, born on March 3, 1943, was me. Grandfather was so pleased that, in his excitement, he woke up everyone in the household to give them the news.

“Sorry to wake you up, but I couldn’t wait till morning,” he announced as he went from room to room, floor to floor, to give the good tidings to each member of the family personally. There was music and jubilation in the Ladha household.

Grandfather was a remarkable man. Born in 1884 in Kutch, India, he decided at the age of twenty to escape the poverty of the Indian village where he grew up—Bhadreshwar, in Gujarat—and immigrated to Zanzibar, East Africa, to seek his fortune. The voyage in those days was not easy. Travellers had to sail in Arab dhows for almost a month before they reached the shores of Africa from India. Some died en route, but most made it and persevered in their quest for a better life. Grandpa started out working for someone else, but eventually he set up his own business, exporting cloves overseas.

My dad ended up working in the thriving and successful family business, while my mom was a housewife, bringing up the kids. It appeared as if I broke the spell on Mom and Dad because there were four more additions to the family after me: two sisters and two brothers.

Grandfather held a *shambo* (communal feast) to celebrate my birth, inviting the Ismaili community for a free lunch. Ismailis—for those who do not know—are a branch of Shia Muslims and followers of the Aga Khan. Today, they number approximately fifteen million and reside primarily in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Europe, North America, and Africa.

My grandfather was a leading and highly regarded member of our community. Many people came to him for advice and guidance on personal and business matters. The whole community attended the *shambo* and were fed *biryani* (rice with spicy meat) and Indian sweets such as *laddoos*, *jalabi*, and *khathyas*. After the meal, everyone enjoyed performing *dandiya raas* and *garba* (traditional Indian dances originating in Gujarat), and the evening ended with a concert by local singers. Everyone had so much fun that they left hoping the count's daughter-in-law would have a second child soon so that he would host another feast!

There was discussion among family members about the name of the new baby, but no agreement was reached. When grandfather heard about it, he called a family meeting. “You people have been wasting time searching for the baby’s name. I have a good solution that, I hope, will be acceptable to everyone,” he said, amid complete silence in the room. “Prince Aly Khan will be visiting Zanzibar soon. Why don’t we ask him to name the baby?”

Everyone looked at him in utter amazement. “What a splendid idea,” someone said. “Why didn’t we think of that?” Everyone was relieved, as if a huge burden was off their shoulders, and they agreed that they should ask the prince, the father of the present Aga Khan, to name the baby—me—during his forthcoming visit.

Ours was a happy household with a lot of joy, but as the family grew, Dad was forced to seek bigger quarters. We moved four houses down the road from my grandfather’s house. Being the oldest child in the family, I remember when my younger siblings cried in the middle of the night. At times it was a chaotic household for my poor mother, who, despite having a helper, had to cope with rearing four children. She was worn out from nursing, feeding, and changing, but somehow she managed without any complaint. Our house was a three-storey building that contained several rooms and dark, long stairs leading to

each floor. As children we were often scared that ghosts might be lurking under those dark stairs—the belief in ghosts was prevalent in Zanzibar—however, it was a perfect location for hide and seek.

Zanzibar, an exotic island in the Indian Ocean, became the hub of the first Nizari Ismaili immigrants, who had come mainly from the Bhadreshwar, Kutch, Kathiawar, Surat, and Mumbai areas of India beginning in the 1880s. It became a favourite place for Indian settlers because Zanzibar's Sultan Said, realizing the great potential of Indian immigrants, had adopted a favourable immigration policy.

The majority of the Asian settlers came to East Africa on their own, motivated primarily by their ambitions of seeking better lives for themselves and driven by the spirit of free enterprise. Their main purpose was to trade, and from Zanzibar they moved into the most remote areas of central East Africa, opening up small general stores known as *dukas*—a term derived from the Indian word *dukan*, meaning “a shop.” This army of Asian merchants, who came to be known as *dukawallas*, was largely responsible for the opening of the eastern interior of the continent and for creating a demand for imported goods and helping to spread the use of money. As soon as a lone Asian shopkeeper arrived in the middle of nowhere and opened

his store, more families arrived, goods were demanded, and business activity flourished.

Life in colonial Africa was comfortable and peaceful. However, the education system, social clubs, and recreational areas all functioned along racial lines—with the best going to the whites. There was little intermingling of the three races except at the employer-employee level. No one questioned the system, as it was the accepted way of life. Every Asian growing up in colonial Africa went about his or her business, reasonably satisfied with the arrangement.

In Tanganyika, where my family eventually settled, the whites had their exclusive, upscale residential areas. In Dar es Salaam, the capital, this area was called Oyster Bay. Each house there was a mansion overlooking the Indian Ocean. The whites enjoyed the sea breeze while sitting in their beautiful gardens, or beside their swimming pools, while at the iron gates at the entrances to their homes there was an *askari*—a watchman—to prevent prowlers from entering. They created a virtual tropical paradise for themselves, and almost all had several servants. The whites and the upper-class Asians never made their own beds, washed dishes, or weeded gardens. Some butchers even carried “boy’s meat”—bones and gristle, meant for the servants—while the masters bought sirloins for themselves.

The racial hierarchy also prevailed in workplaces. In a bank, for example, the boss was usually a white man, while his subordinates—clerks, tellers, and accountants—were Asians, and the cleaners and messengers were Africans. While the Asians could play tennis in European clubs, they were not allowed to enter the club premises for a drink after their games.

In Dar es Salaam, many Asians lived in downtown apartments, close to their businesses, while others lived in suburban areas such as Upanga or Changombe. Asians preferred to live in apartments—or “flats,” as we called them. This was especially the case with the Ismailis, who built communal cooperative housing. Ismailis were completely self-sufficient: they were born in an Ismaili maternity home or hospital, were educated in the Aga Khan Ismaili schools, spent their evenings playing sports in Aga Khan clubs, and were buried in their own Ismaili communal cemetery. The Ismailis were a nation in themselves. From the time they were born until they died, they were well served by their communal institutions.

The Africans, or the blacks, lived in Third World conditions in mud or thatched houses with poor sanitation and hardly any plumbing. The area behind Kariakoo, the city’s central market district, was allocated for African settlement during colonial times. The Africans stayed

in their shantytowns, drinking *pombe*—cheap African liquor—and would often gather around a fire in the centre of the compound in the evenings while someone played drums for entertainment. There was no official colour bar as such, but throughout East Africa areas were zoned by race. It was an accepted way of life. In Nairobi, Kenya, to give one example, Africans lived in Pumwani, Asians in Parkland and Nairobi West, and whites in the suburbs of Muthaiga, Lavington, Karen, and Kitisuru. In pre-independence time, there were even signs on public toilets stating explicitly that certain facilities were reserved for “Europeans Only,” “Asians Only,” and “Africans Only.” Needless to say, the Africans had the worst type.

In Dar es Salaam, the whites enjoyed their evenings at the Gymkhana Club, playing golf, drinking gin and tonic, smoking cigars, reading British newspapers flown in especially for them, discussing British politics or sports, oblivious of—or at least turning a blind eye towards—the realities of Tanganyika’s downtrodden masses.

The Asians also had their own communal clubs, such as the Patel Brotherhood, Lohana, and Aga Khan clubs, where they would pass their time playing volleyball or cricket or would enjoy drinking a beer or two, also ignoring African sensitivities. Asian families patronized the Naaz or Purnima restaurants in downtown Dar es

Salaam most evenings, usually concluding with a visit to the Indian paan house.

The paan shop, which often doubled as a tobacconist and place to exchange gossip, was one of the most distinctive features of Dar es Salaam's Asian area. Paan is essentially a dessert consisting of chopped nuts, syrup, and white lime, which are then wrapped in *mtambu*, or betel leaf. Paan is chewed and sucked but not swallowed. One would pop the triangular parcel into the mouth, munch it, and then spit out the pith when finished.

Every Sunday, carloads of Asian families would head out on picnics, attend drive-in cinemas, or simply go for a drive in Dar es Salaam for pleasure. During such outings with my family in the early 1960s, I would take the wheel. Dad would sit beside me in front, and Mom and my two sisters would sit in the back seat listening to Bollywood songs. We would cruise the seashore, pass through affluent Oyster Bay, and then head back into town for kabobs and tea at the Naaz, where we didn't even have to get out of the car as service was provided on a tray hung from the vehicle's window. These outings were a part of most Asian families' weekly rituals.

Asians were generally considered bad employers in East Africa, said to overwork their employees, underpay them, and give them no overtime wages. There were no

strict labour standards, and servants—who were often fed a family’s leftover food—washed clothes, did the dishes and the beds, cleaned toilets, polished shoes, dusted, and vacuumed, along with anything else that needed to be done. Some of these domestic workers started early in the morning and worked till six or seven o’clock in the evening; they sometimes had to work weekends and holidays. This system continued for years, and it was practised especially among the older generation of Asian employers. It was a colonial system, functioning with neither labour laws nor a minimum-wage structure.

The life of an African domestic servant was terrible. Most of them would come from rural areas, travelling into the city by bus or on foot to work. The *ayahs* (nannies) were hired to look after babies, while male servants were hired to do household chores. In some households, loyal servants would work their whole life for a particular family, looking after the same master, his children, and his grandchildren. When a servant got old, he would recommend his son or a close relative as his replacement.

As I’ve said, the three races—Africans, Asians, and Europeans—lived in separate worlds, though things were not as bad in East Africa as in apartheid South Africa. We had separate schools, hospitals, and residential areas, and this was accepted. We were born with it. This