

# Allidina Visram (1851-1916)



He was born in Kera, Kutch, in 1851, and came to Zanzibar on a dhow in 1863, at the age of 12 years. He proceeded to Bagamoyo to work as an assistant to Sewa Haji Paroo (1851-1897). Soon he branched out on his own and started organizing caravans into the interior. He opened branches of his firm at Dar-es-Salaam, Sadani, Tabora, Ujiji, and Alima and Tindo in the Belgium Congo. In the early years he purchased cloves, wax, and honey in exchange for cloth, salt, grains, etc. Soon he began to specialise in ivory, which was increasingly a by-product of hunting safaris by early Europeans and Americans. Allidina was given the contract to provide packed foods to the hunters. After the death of Sewa Haji Paroo he

took over his caravan trade and took his wagons as far as Uganda, and parts of Congo Free State and Southern Sudan. He was the “King of Ivory” in Africa. With the ongoing construction of the Uganda Railway he opened many stores along the line of the railway and became the supplier of food to the Indian workers. He also obtained the contract of paying the railway workers their salaries as well as providing funds to the railway authority. He was practically a bank: cheques given to him at the coast could be cashed in the interior for a commission of 3-5 percent.

By 1904 he began to branch into agriculture and within a few years owned seven large plantations, for sugar cane and rubber, with experimental plots of grams, fruits, flowers, tea, and cotton, employing over 3,000 workers on his projects. He opened his first ginnery at Entebbe in 1910 for exporting ginned cotton to India, via dhows and steamer to Kisumu and then by rail to Mombasa. To facilitate the transport he himself owned the sailing crafts on Lake Victoria. At Kisumu he had his transportation hub for the connection to the coast. His telegraphic address said it all: PA-GAZI, meaning transporters.

Varas Allidina Visram was reputed for his kindness and generosity. He donated freely to the construction of the first Jamatkhana in Kisumu in 1905, which was inaugurated by the Imam. On the occasion of the opening of the prayer hall, Varas Allidina, Mukhi Varas Hasham Jamal (1880-1972), and others came forward to pull the Imam’s carriage. The Imam would have none of it: “I accept your zeal, but you need not be so demonstrative of it. You are my spiritual children. Varas Ismail Gangji had managed to lift the slur on the community khoja uthao boja (Khoja! lift the load). Now I cannot allow you to lift this load. Hitch back the horses and come and ride with me.”

In 1905 the Imam instructed him to encourage further immigration of the community from Kathiawar. Enlisting the help of Mukhi Valji Hirji of Mombasa, Mukhi Varas Hasham Jamal of Kisumu and his deputy manager at Kampala Rashid Khamis he sponsored many new immigrant Ismailis to East Africa, first as his employees and then as his agents. They spread out to Homa Bay, Mumias, Sio Port, and then into Uganda. It is said that 90 percent of the Ismailis who attained prosperity in Kenya and Uganda owe their settlement to him.

He was bestowed the title of Varas by the Aga Khan (III) for his communal services, the first person to be given that title in Kenya and Uganda. He was ecumenical however: he contributed substantial funds to the construction of Namirembe Cathedral, and to the Red Cross and the Church Mission Hospital in Kampala. And he sponsored and employed as many non-Ismailis as came his way.

He lived to see 65 years of hard life bring prosperity to Africa, and made regular annual visits to every branch of his vast business empire. On one such trip to Congo (then Belgian Congo) to recover outstanding debts from his



agents he met with refusals. Highly shocked, he contracted a fever when he returned to his base at Mombasa and died soon after on June 30, 1916.

His son, Varas Abdul Rasul (d. 1923), built a High School in Mombasa to commemorate the name of his father. A memorial bronze was presented by Rajabali Hasham Paroo, his life-long associate and his General Manager, and was unveiled in Mombasa in 1937 by the governor of Kenya.

Varas Allidina certainly pioneered the emergence of East African countries on the world stage. The British Commissioner of Uganda, Fredrick Jackson, noting the difficulties in getting farmers to grow new crops and hence get the economy going, wrote, "I am doing all I can to induce the people to cultivate sugar cane and simsim (sesame). An Indian trader named Allidina Visram is already prepared to buy as much as the natives like to cultivate and that should assist in the circulation of the rupee if the people can only be induced to cultivate." Later as governor he described Allidina as "a charming old gentleman, respected by everyone in the country, high and low, white or black." Dr. Cyril Ehrlich wrote in *The Uganda Economy, 1903-1945* (p 18), "Perhaps the most important individual in the early history in East Africa, Seth Allidina Visram was responsible for laying the firm foundation not only of trade in Uganda but of such industries as cotton, sugar, rubber, tea and various other agricultural products as well as of shipping across Lake Victoria." And according to *Oriental Nairobi*, "An interesting point is that the Khoja community was in East Africa even before the foundation of Nairobi, the merchant, Prince Allidina Visram, also known as the Uncrowned King of Uganda, extended his activities on the mainland from Mombasa to the lower reaches of the Nile."

*This is where it all started, Allidina Visram's shop-house on, well, Luwum Street. That's how it is now - the only building of that type still left on the whole street.*



*The article is derived from Tajddin, Mumtaz Ali Sadik Ali: 101 Ismaili Heroes, Vol.1, Islamic Book Publisher, Karachi, January 2003, p 052.*

**Editor's note:** The rupee (and the ana and the pice) was the currency in East Africa until well into the 1920s. The denominations were even indicated in Gujarati. Varas Hasham Jamal in the above account was my father's wada bapa (eldest paternal uncle), my father being the son of Valli Jamal. My grandfather started his employment with Allidina Visram. Hasham Jamal (Bwana Mazuri) established a sugar-cane farm at Muhoroni near Mumias. It figures still.

In 1972 after Jean-Bedel Bokassa declared himself Emperor of the Central African Republic the first country he visited was Uganda. In a moment of imperial euphoria, Idi Amin honoured him by changing the name of the street where Allidina had established his first shop in Kampala from Allidina Visram Street to Bokassa Street. Obote II changed it to Luwum Street in honour of Archbishop Luwum who was shot by Idi Amin, some say personally. Of course Archbishop Luwum should be honoured. But the irony wasn't lost on Asians that in redressing the wrong done against them – the alleged duka-owners – by inviting them back, the wrong done against them in erasing the name of their patron, the King of Duka-wallahs (of course he was much beside), from the street where he first established his duka, wasn't also redressed at this time.

There is still a Rashid Khamis Road in Old Kampala.

### Amin Dada on Allidina Visram

After ranting against Nyerere Amin turned his attention to the Trans-Africa Highway from Mombasa to Lagos through Kampala and Kinshasa. Amin said, "Although I like Mobutu very much, I would like it to go through Bangui, Central Africa, because Bokassa is my friend. That is why I have named Allidina Visram Street after him. Why have a British Asian in the middle of Kampala." Gordon B K Wavamuno, *The Story of an African Entrepreneur*, p 125.



## Allidina Visram School

If you became six years old before 1935 it was quite likely you went to the AV School at Mombasa – and if you were from upcountry stayed in “Ada’s Hostel,” where the discipline was medieval. The school was actually built by Allidina’s son Abdul-Rasul in honour of his father. It cost 50 thousand pound sterling, which mark down as 1.5 million pounds in today’s money. It could accommodate 500 pupils right from its opening. All the material - the teak for the stairway, doors and desks, the steel for the windows, the blocks of stones – were brought over from India, but despite this the walls collapsed several times at the start of construction. The area where the school was/is located – Ras Kibramne, overlooking the old Nyali Bridge – “had a considerable reputation (still has) as an area of spirits,” as the school’s 50th anniversary souvenir said. In fact the school was being built over Arab graves. “The Mzimu, the Swahili custodian of spirits, advised that a pot of gold be offered as a placatory measure to the spirits, and that done, the irate spirit obligingly returned to his repose, for no further hindrances arose from this quarter.” Now that’s good English, and let it be said as an aside that the best scholars before 1950 all came out of Allidina’s school.

If you went looking for spirits, you sure found them. And of course boys did just that. There was a cave at the bottom of the school grounds going all the way to the cliff. If you entered the cave you came back with a slap on your face.

Was the inauspicious start to the school anything to do with having hurt the feelings of the Ismaili spiritual leader? It’s a well-known story in the community that Abdul-Rasul declined to match the donation of one lakh (100,000/-) rupees made by the rival Suleman Verjee family to build an Ismaili school, because he wanted a school for all Asian children. The Imam Sir Sultan Mohamed Shah Aga Khan III expressed his displeasure at this. Old members of the community date the decline of the Allidina Visram empire from that episode. Family members attribute it to Abdul-Rasul’s care-free ways. He sounds like what we’d now call “a spoilt brat” – the rich man’s son given over to profligacy, in his case card-playing, with a hint of drinking and gambling at the side.

Based on “history generally known” – in Mombasa and all over, refreshed by several accounts in Cynthia Salvadori, “We came in dhows.” Great-grandson Nizoo writes of Abdul-Rasul’s worldly ways (pp 108-109 in Salvadori) alluded in the forgoing and even hints that the school might have been built because “he lost a bet.”

## POLITICS AS USUAL

There were three “uncrowned kings of commerce” in East Africa before 1900 – Sewa Haji (Paroo), Sir Tharia Topan, and Allidina Visram. In the next decade there were several super-rich, although none of them were called “kings.” Suleiman Virjee and Kassim Lakha would rank amongst them. Madhvani and Mehta came later and surpassed all of them, but as an aside it should be noted that the early pioneers were Ismailis, quite likely because of their Imams’ links with the British Raj, starting from the 46th Imam Aga Khan I (Mehlati, from his district in Iran) who befriended and was befriended by the British when he came riding out of Iran to escape persecution. Bohras – the Jivanjee’s - also played important pioneering roles on the Tanganyika coast.

Rivalries were rife – not unlike now. Suleman Virjee was Mombasa’s first Mukhi. He wanted to “do” for the Imam. The mosque was just a hut. Suleman Virjee felt it was time to erect a more permanent stone structure. He went to Zanzibar to enlist the support of Sir Tharia Topan (knighthood by Queen Victoria). Topan “insulted him, telling him to go away.” Tharia Topan comes to Mombasa the next year. He receives a jubilant welcome from the Ismailis. Suleman Virjee keeps to his shop. Topan orders Suleman to come out. Suleman: “You insulted me when I came to you for the donation for the jamatkhana. Being a millionaire doesn’t give you that right. Please go away.” (Salvadori, p 98).

Verjee was certainly on an institution-building zeal. He wants to build a school for Ismaili children. He donates one lakh rupees for that (say half a million dollars of today). He asks Abdul Rasul Allidina Visram to match. Abdul Rasul looks at the Verjee family as rivals and announces he’ll build a school for all Asians.

Kassamal Rahemtulla Paroo remains loyal to Allidina Visram for having helped his family when in need. Truth to tell, Allidina was only returning a favour as he had started as an apprentice in Sewa Haji’s enterprise.

## Nanji Kalidas Mehta on Alidina

When I set foot on the soil of Jinja I heard numerous stories and anecdotes about his fame. He became my ideal as Uganda’s captain of commerce and man of charity. My youthful spirit sought inspiration from the legacy of fame and generosity he left behind. To me he was like a brilliant star that once shone with the full brilliance of the heavens but suddenly disappeared in the dark, leaving behind a dazzling trail. page 77. He had five hundred employees which included Hindus and Muslims. He stood far above the distinctions of caste and creed and treated them all equally.



(above) Mausoleum, June 2009, somewhat neglected as relatives have gone.

(below) Khoja Jafferbhai Alidina, b 1890, d 1917. Inscription after Bismillah: Ya Allah; Ya Mohamed, Ya Ali, Ya Fatima, Ya Hassan, Ya Hussein - the Five Holy Ones



## Ebrahim Jamal remembers Allidina

in Salvadori, p 150. She says she felt very fortunate that she got to talk to Ebrahim Jamal, the only person she met who had met Allidina Visram. Date of interview not given, except for “just before his death,” so should be around 1992.

By the time I came to Kisumu, Allidina Visram was established in Uganda. There were no roads to Uganda, so he used to travel back and forth by boat from Kisumu. He sometimes used the Railway steamer but he also had a small steamer of his own. I remember seeing Allidina a few times, here in Kisumu. He was a hefty man with a beard, and he used to wear the old-fashioned embroidered coats. He was a very important man, a big businessman and a leader of the community, and he kept his distance.

I had once spoken to my great-uncle Ebrahim Jamal about Allidina Visram. He was one of the last surviving Asians to know him personally. He said he was a very straight, come-to-the-point person. Ebrahim had just come to Kisumu to join his brothers. Allidina said to him, “I know you are the youngest of the family but here it’s all work, otherwise you might as well go back.”

## Manubhai Madhvani on Allidina Visram

Along with my great-uncle Vithaldas Haridas, I claim the honour of counting him as my spiritual ancestor. When my great-uncle reached Mombasa (1893; age 18) he knew there was only one man he had to find. Allidina took him on straightaway. My uncle worked for him for five years and then set off on his own. By 1914 Allidina had set up a base at Jinja. My father was honoured to become his friend. Every evening, after Muljibhai closed his shop, he would go and visit Allidina Visram. My father was around 20 at this time. A caring person and a god host, he was a very important influence on the younger man, many of his good qualities reappearing later in Muljibhai’s life. Thousands of people attended his funeral after his death at Mengo Hospital on 30 June 1916, including the Kabaka and the Governor.

We can imagine the conversation between Allidina and the young Vithaldas Madhvani went like that too when Vithaldas came ashore at Mombasa:

Vithaldas tamaru naam? Bapuji ni chitthi mali ti chela machwa uper. Garam pani tyar hashe, to nahi lyo, ketla wakhat thi machwa uper mokko nahi malyo lagto. Pacchi thodok araam kari khawa maate garej awi jajo. Te baad tamne dukan ma lai jayish.

Vithaldas your name? I got your father’s note in the last dhow. Hot water should be ready, seems like you didn’t bathe all that time on the dhow. Rest for a while and come for lunch at our place only. After that I shall take you to the shop.

Tak tak. None of how did you leave your father, how was the voyage, just go and bath off, eat, and come to the shop. Notice that although there’s major age difference, Allidina still addresses the young Vithaldas with the honorific tame’.

## from *East Africa and Uganda Mail*:

In one day 10 of his dhows, with a crew of 100 men, anchored in Ugowe Bay. Besides liberal salaries allotted to all members of his big establishment everywhere, boarding and lodging are free. After each successful voyage, presents are given to the crew. The whole of the employees are happy and contented.

## from *The Early History of Nairobi Township* by Dr E Boedeker:

One of the most important shops in the Indian Bazaar belonged to Allidina Visram. He had a charming personality and was extremely popular with everybody. His shops were an absolute boon in the old days where one could buy all sorts of groceries, including wines etc, at very reasonable prices, virtually on one’s door.