

HOW I EMBARKED UPON DHOWS

By Cynthia Salvadori

In my previous story I described how I got involved in writing *Through Open Doors*. The book, filled with side notes and little margin illustrations as well as colorful photographs, was such a success that the first printing soon sold out. A reprint was in order. But meanwhile I had, naturally, got all sorts of new information, and got some things clearer in my mind. My wonderful publisher, Kul Bhakoo, not only agreed we could do a new edition but that we could double the number of color plates! And so the new revised edition came out to my complete satisfaction.

All the time while working my way *Through Open Doors*, I felt that in a way I was perpetrating exactly what I wanted to combat, the idea of the Asians in Kenya as communities. I had made it clear that the Asians were not “a” community but many incredibly diverse communities. But they were still, despite a few little side notes about individuals, about communities, not people.

At the same time I had been struck by the number of books on the shelves of friends’ houses about the Kenya pioneers. And had noticed with a certain amount of disgust that the word ‘pioneer’ was always taken to mean ‘European’ pioneer. Not a word about the Asian pioneers.

At that time, my beloved companion, Andy, who had helped me with *Through Open Doors*, died. I desperately needed something really absorbing to do. And so the idea for another book came into my head, one that would both rectify the view of Asians as communities, not people, and at the same time put paid to the arrogant assumption that all pioneers in Kenya were Europeans. I would write a book about the Asian pioneers!

And not just a handful of prominent people. I would try to get a cross-section of people from all the different communities (which I now knew about, thanks to having done *Through Open Doors*) and from all walks of life, from sailors to stationmasters, from shoe makers to lawyers, from little dukawallahs to major entrepreneurs. Kul Bhakoo, although he had sold his Kenway publishing company, said he would back me to the hilt and that somehow he would see it got published. And so I embarked upon Dhows! And I did so at the coast. I knew that with all my contacts from *Through Open Doors* I would have no trouble locating pioneer families in Nairobi and Mombasa. I decided to start with the furthest places. By now, after Andy’s death, I had moved not only my horses but our cat, Ursa, and myself, to some old friends on a farm near Thika. John had (and still has) a very good Africana collection, which I could trawl through looking for references to Indians in Kenya in the early days. And Kay would look after my animals, so I was free to travel.

I decided to start the book in Lamu, where my own family history in Kenya starts—my mother’s uncle by marriage, Jack Haggard, being the first British vice-consul there, back in the 1880s! And, as if I needed any incentive, my own oldest friend, the artist Jony Waite, has lived there for decades, knows ‘everyone’! She told me that the old man who sat every day on the baraza in front of the old fort was a Parsee named Keki Dastoor, a business partner of her Swahili neighbor, Bwana Bakari.

Parsees are rare birds anywhere, but particularly in Kenya. That sounded like a perfect start to my project. But when I got to Lamu, Keki was not there in his usual place. He had become so feeble he was now confined to his house. He, his crippled brother whom I’d never known of, and their cats were being looked after by one of Bakari’s employees. I followed him back through the narrow streets (on the way

he paused to toss a piece of meat from his bag to a cat waiting on a window ledge, who reached out one paw and deftly caught it—a daily ritual), through an unremarkable door, up some old stairs. And there in a room so layered in dust that its one window seemed glazed, lay Keki on his bed, on a mattress so thin it was hardly a pallet. But his mind was as clear as the room was cobwebbed, and he told me about all the early days, how he had ended up in Lamu. He pointed, 'look in the pile over there'. There amongst yellowed newspapers was one of those superbly sharp old formal photographs, of himself as a handsome young man with a group of Parsee friends. And the passport of his dead fellow Parsee, Dinshaw Talati. I asked if I could please borrow them to photocopy, and Keki said, 'take them, take them, I have no use for them'. Feeling a little like a grave robber, I did.

When I left, I asked Keki if he needed anything. He said he would like yoghurt, and 'nice light Gujarati food, not this heavy Swahili food'. So I arranged with a Bohra friend to send him some dishes from time to time. It was just in time. Jony phoned me from Lamu a fortnight later to tell me Keki had died. His story could not be called anything other than "Deathbed Recollections" .

The Bohra friend, Shabberali Esmail, was from one of the very long-settled Bohra families of the island town. Over cups of tea in his open-air restaurant he told me all about "Six Generations in Lamu", and then took me upstairs to meet his mother who had come from Mogadishu, a pioneer in her own way. I interviewed the sole remnant of a once thriving Ithnasheri community, was shown the huge defunct Ismaili jamatkhana, and the house where a little Hindu temple had once been.

Back at the Blackwells I did a bit of reading, writing and riding, then set off in the little brown Suzuki that Andy had bought for us ten years earlier to go to the other end of Kenya. When I drove into Kisumu, where I hadn't been for twenty years, I didn't know a soul. First and foremost I needed to locate a place to stay. A Sikh gurdwara was bound to be a good bet. But en route I happened to spot the Arya Samaj's Vedic temple. I stopped in, explained to the man living there, a long-term expatriate Indian teacher as it turned out, why I wanted to spend a few days in Kisumu, and asked if they had a guest room I could rent. 'Yes, but . . ., well, it's not very nice. Just wait here, my daughter will make you some tea.' And so he disappeared and I drank tea. He returned within half an hour with an elegant elderly gentleman who introduced himself with utmost courtesy. 'I am Satyavrat Jobanputra and my wife and I will be pleased to have you as our guest.'

Sat and his wife Madhuri made me totally at home, in a wonderfully airy upstairs room in their fine old two-story house, and Sat, a Lohana who has spent all his life in Kisumu, not only gave me a run-down on the history of the town, of what his family had been doing, but he also introduced me to the pioneers of each and every other Asian community in the area!

I particularly wanted to meet pioneers from the Indian farming community in nearby Kibos, because that was the only area in colonial Kenya where Indians were actually encouraged to farm. So Sat drove me out and introduced me to the oldest of the Sikh farmers still remaining. We sat outside under the shade of an ancient mango tree, and Gurdial Singh Pandhal told me what farming was like in the early days, how all the farm work was done with the help of oxen, just like back in the Punjab. What could I call his story but "Farming with stone tools"?

I also wanted to meet Badalas, a sea-going community that was one of the first to settle on the East African coast. At the beginning of the 20th century, the colonial government had employed a number of Badalas from Mombasa to go to Kisumu to handle the Lake Victoria ferries that were part of the East African Railways and Harbours network, and to teach the natives how to build and sail small craft. After

independence, most of the Badalas had gone back to Mombasa, but Sat knew there were a few around, one of them running a restaurant. The rather young Badala restaurateur was not very up on family history but kindly invited me to a Badala wedding that was being held the next evening. Where? At the Goan Hall! Just around the corner from the Jopanputras' home.

The wedding, in the main room, was properly colourful, but when it came time for everyone to give the bride and groom their best wishes, I drifted off to look around the hall. There was a small room off to one side, what had obviously been—the Goans being serious drinkers—the bar. Firmly shuttered. As I turned to go out again, I saw to my astonishment a spectacular mural. It depicted Africa decorated with wild animals and India adorned with palm trees, and St Frances Xavier in Goa. And in between, the blue Indian Ocean filled with white waves and sailing ships!

That was it! The cover for the book! I took a few photos as best I could with my little flash. When I showed them to Kul on my return, he absolutely agreed, and sent his own photographer to get some shots with better lighting.

When Sat and I had interviewed everyone he could think of, I started wending my way back to the farm. But of course I stopped everywhere on the way where I thought I might find Indian pioneer families. I remembered that once I had met, by chance, a lame man from the Wanza community who told me he came from Kakamega, that I would be welcome any time, and he had given me his phone number. When I phoned, out of the blue—it was now at least two years later—Bhimji Chauhan sounded rather startled, said that his wife and family had moved to Eldoret. But he rose to the occasion and invited me to his humble flat, ushered me in to the spare room, and cooked us supper himself, and next day helped me locate several pioneer families in the town.

By the time I got back to the Blackwells I had filled several notebooks. I sat down to type all my notes into order, spent more time reading through John's books, and began doing more research at the Macmillan Library's then wonderful Africa Room. If I found a reference in some European's memoirs about an unnamed dukawalla or a stationmaster at some particular place in some particular year I hoped I might be able to identify that person, by matching them up with some interview. In some cases I succeeded! In some cases not.

After a month or so of such library research, I was ready to go out 'in the field'. I thought it would be nice to go to Maralal, where I hadn't been for several years. And so I met Mohammed Siddiq Bhola and part of his extensive family. Like me, he had always thought of Maralal as "It was Paradise then". Having at the time the only garage in town, Bhola was very well known, and had been mentioned in travellers' articles. But I looked in vain for his name in Wilfrid Thesiger's *My Kenya Days*. When the irascible old Thesiger 'retired' to Maralal, Bhola not only looked after his equally bad-tempered old Land Rover, but gave him a room to live in over his garage entrance. For years. But there was no chance of matching Bhola's own story with anything Thesiger wrote because in his book Thesiger did not make a single mention of Bhola, not even in the acknowledgements.

One morning I was in the Bholas' sitting room skimming through several slightly out-of-date newspapers. I saw a familiar face in the obituaries. Gurdial Singh Pandhal of Kibos had passed away. It was that, coming so soon after Keki Dastoor's death, that made me realize, more poignantly than ever, I had to hurry.

I combined Maralal with Nakuru, Gilgil and Naivasha, then when I had written up all those notes, set off again, this time to Mombasa. Once again it was the Pujara sisters who got me off to a splendid start, directing me to pioneer families of virtually all communities and walks of life. At the top of the list was Count Paroo, who was history personified. Over 90 but still going to his office - walking up the stairs slowly - every day. His father had worked with his fellow Ismaili, Allidina Visram, and Count Paroo was one of only two people I met who had actually seen that famous man, though regretfully he was so young at the time that he couldn't recall anything about him.

In Mombasa I had the friendship and help not only of the Pujara sisters but also of Judy Aldrick, a dedicated historian who for years had been alternatively the chair /secretary of Friends of Fort Jesus. Between us we tracked down an elderly Badala who had worked on ships. We found Essak Kana living in a little old house, squashed behind a horrid new building that was shaped like a ship! We also tracked down innumerable more Bohras, the repetition of whose names always had us both confused. When I got back to the farm with all my notes, I realized that I'd seriously muddled two large families. I phoned Judy to please re-interview them and sort them out for me. In the course of doing that she met Abdulhussein E. Adamjee who casually mentioned he had his father's manuscript of how he had walked from Mombasa to Kisumu in the very early days. Which led to another book (and will lead to another story here!).

I also came across some people by chance. I was walking down Old Kilindini Rd, peering as usual into every open doorway. In one open-to-the-street room just opposite the Ithnasheri mosque, there was a man sitting at a sewing machine. Yes, he was a tailor, yes, Goan. But his family had not been here all that long. I was sitting on a bench scribbling away, next to a pretty young woman of ample proportions. Much too young to be of any interest to me, but because I can't help it I started talking with her. 'Come up to my house, it's just behind here.'

She led me through an archway into the courtyard of a tenement building, and up the rickety wooden stairs to the even more rickety balcony from which one could see a whole little hive of multi-cultural, multi-racial activity. She introduced me to her three young children (she looked much too young to have even one). Her parents were living in the apartment facing the street, and on a later visit Kulsum got her mother to tell me how, when she was a little girl in Mombasa, she used to collect and sell "Almonds, five for a penny". Kulsum became one of my closest friends—and is now the grandmother of five! (And lives in a much less interesting part of town, for that wonderful old tenement building has been demolished.) Back to the farm, back to writing up notes. And then it was time for another safari, this time around Mt Kenya. Having lived with Andy, our horses and our cat, in a cottage on a ranch in the Timau area for nearly a decade, I knew many people in Nanyuki, including Asians. All the Settlers knew them, particularly the family that runs the famous Settlers Store. But now I went in not just to buy groceries. There I found not only the current Patel owners, but, by amazing luck, the previous owner, Apabhai Patel, who had come out from England for a visit, and was able to tell me firsthand how it all began, "The start of Settlers".

Alpana Patel gave me a list of people I should contact round the mountain, at Meru. Along with assorted Shahs, the dominant Asian community there, one family stuck out, the Wasons, a Punjabi Hindu family who had a large timber mill. Satish Wason came from a long line of rogues that he delighted in telling me about, and how his family had been "On the side of the Mau Mau". It turned out that Satish was related to all sorts of people I knew in Nairobi, and it was interesting to hear their versions of his stories. Satish proposed that we write a whole book just about his family; I agreed it would be great fun, but did think we might be in for a bit of trouble! A few years after I met him, Satish turned the timber mill over

to his sons and 'retired' to Timau, where he and his young Muslim wife, Mumtaz, have built the delightfully rustic 'Timau River Lodge'—where I stop every time I'm driving up to Marsabit or back. Then back to the farm, back to Nairobi and Mombasa. For years Andy and I had been giving talks for the Friends of Fort Jesus Tuesday evening programmes. When I was starting the book, Judy lined me up to give a talk on something or other, and in introducing me took the opportunity to say I was embarking on 'Dhows', would anyone who had anything they would like to contribute please get in touch with me. At the end of my talk a handsome woman came up to me, introduced herself as Shirin Sondhi, and said she was from a large and very old family—her father had had the first shop in Nyeri! 'But you don't want to talk to me, you want to talk to my brothers Hyderali and Hassanali in Nairobi. (But I talked to Shirin, too, and she and her husband Jagdish are among my best friends.)

I did as instructed, and thus met the remarkable Rattansi family. There was nothing the two brothers liked to do more than sit around and tell one hilarious story after another, particularly about "Cultural confusions". One evening Hyderalibhai invited me to his house to meet their eldest sister, Kulsum, who was a brilliant story teller. All in Gujarati. I couldn't understand a word, but even so I was convulsed with laughter from her expressions and gestures and the general hilarity. Hassan and his wife, Vijoo, living in Muthaiga, were perfectly situated as a marvelous pit stop on my trips between Nairobi and Thika. When Hyderali passed away the other year, I lost a delightful acquaintance. When Dr Hassanali (yes, Dr; he'd been awarded an honorary degree for his management of the Rattansi Educational Trust the father had set up) died in late 2003, Kenya lost one of its finest men, one whom I was proud to call a friend. Around the same time an American friend whose opinion I greatly respect was insisting I meet a certain Akbar Hussein of Expo' and his wife, Tove. When I ascertained from Helen that Akbar was an Ismaili, I told her I had far too many Ismaili stories—the Rattans could fill a whole book just themselves. I refused to talk to any more Ismailis, I needed other tribes to give my book the balance I wanted it to have. But eventually, because Helen was so persistent, and because Expo' was so conveniently in the middle of town, I strolled in one day.

It was one of the best moves I ever made. Akbar was – is - so passionately interested in Kenya's history that with amazing generosity he offered to copy gratis all the precious old family photos I was locating which I wanted to use for the book. (He then went on, with a group of like-minded people, to set up the African-Asian Heritage exhibition at Nairobi's national museum, while Tove has become the world expert on her compatriot, Karen Blixen.)

When I had got what I felt was a good cross-section of stories, I told Kul we could start putting it together. Easier said than done. I had done a mock-up with every quote and photo pasted in place, but . . . one person at Kul Graphics started, then quit Kul Graphics. Meanwhile, technology changed. Another took over, starting from scratch, then had to do something else. The third person kept losing files . . . I was getting incredibly frustrated.

But I made the best of it. All the delays in production gave me time to interview more people. The book grew from two volumes to a set of three! But eventually even I had had enough! By then a young man had joined the firm, Lakhvir Singh. Lucky was his nickname, and Lucky he was. Although he was not even of a Kenyan family, he was so fascinated by the book that he was determined it was going to be a masterpiece. And he succeeded.

All the while I had been sending, as I promised everyone I would, each story back to its 'owner' for corrections, amendments, whatever they wanted to add or delete. The stories, I made it clear from the

beginning to everyone, were their stories, not mine, their chance to say what they wanted to say. Which is why the title of our book is not 'They Came Dhows' but We Came in Dhows.

Cynthia Salvadori's connection with East Africa goes back nearly 150 years. Her mother, the artist Joyce Woodforde Pawle, is related to John Hanning Speke who in 1857 discovered the source of the Nile, and to John G. (Jack) Haggard who in 1884-5 was the first British Vice-Consul in Lamu. She herself started life on a farm near Njoro in the 1930s when her father, Max Salvadori, a political historian, sought temporary refuge for his bride and himself in Kenya after having been jailed in Italy for his anti-Fascist activities. Her father left Kenya shortly after she was born, to continue eventually as lieutenant colonel in the British Special Forces, his militant fight against Italian Fascism, while his wife, daughter and son were parked in USA. Cynthia grew up in America and Europe but, in 1962, returned to Kenya and considered that her home ever since.