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# CULTURAL AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCES AND LEGACIES OF ESOP SULIMAN AND CONTEMPORARIES IN WELLINGTON, SOUTH AFRICA, 1900-1938<sup>1</sup>

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This study attempts to investigate socio-cultural experiences of Esop Suliman, an immigrant from India, in the rural parts of the Cape Colony, South Africa, roundabout the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until 1938 in the Cape Province. Special emphasis is placed on the town of Wellington. The study differs from previous work on Indian history in South Africa that tended to focus on leadership. It focuses on an individual, Esop Suliman, his family and contemporaries through archival searches, interviews and the author's own recollections. The study commences with a cursory literature review of Indian immigration to South Africa, followed by a historical overview of Indian presence in Wellington prior to the Second World War. Historical narratives, in particular regarding Esop Suliman, were collected from archives and personal interviews in order to answer the research question: How did Esop Suliman and other immigrants from India negotiate the Cape Colony's segregationist practices and other restrictions to which they were subjected by the local authorities? The biographies of Esop Suliman, his family and contemporaries relied on previous research findings that drew conclusions about matters related to travel, business, marriage and family life, assimilation and identity consciousness. A conclusion was drawn that the individuals in this study had mapped pathways for themselves by having possessed the ability to establish social networks across cultural divides, showing what it meant to be human. This humanity left a legacy for their descendants to expand on.

**Keywords:** Indian immigration; Culture; Wellington

## **Kulturele en sosiale ervarings en nalatenskap van Esop Suliman en tydgenote op Wellington, Suid-Afrika, 1900-1938**

Die doel van hierdie studie is om sosiokulturele ervarings van Esop Suliman, 'n immigrant uit Indië, teen die wisseling van die 20ste eeu in die landelike gebiede van die Kaapkolonie tot 1938 in die Kaapprovinsie, Suid-Afrika, te ondersoek.

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Prof Hein Willemsse for proofreading the final draft before final submission.

Veral die dorp Wellington ontvang spesiale aandag. Die studie verskil van vorige werk oor Indiërgeskiedenis in Suid-Afrika, wat meestal op leierskap konsentreer. Hierdie bydrae handel oor die individu Esop Suliman, sy familie en tydgenote aan die hand van argiefsoektogte, onderhoude en die outeur se eie herinneringe. Die studie begin met 'n oorsigtige literatuurstudie oor Indiërimigrasie na Suid-Afrika, gevolg deur 'n historiese oorsig van Indiëerteenwoordigheid op Wellington voor die Tweede Wêreldoorlog. Historiese narratiewe, in die besonder oor Esop Suliman, is uit argiewe en persoonlike onderhoude bekom om die navorsingsvraag te beantwoord: Hoe het Esop Suliman en ander immigrante uit Indië die Kaapkolonie se segregasionistiese praktyke en ander inperkings waaraan die plaaslike owerhede hulle onderwerp het, te bowe gekom? Die biografieë van Esop Suliman, sy familie en tydgenote berus op vorige navorsingsbevindings wat gevolgtrekkings maak oor kwessies met betrekking tot reis, sake, die huwelik- en gesinslewe, assimilasie en identiteitsbesef. Hierdie studie kom tot die slotsom dat die bestudeerde individue hulle weg deur die samelewing gebaan het danksy hulle vermoë om sosiale netwerke oor kulturele skeidslyne heen te bou, en sodoende te toon waaroor menswees werklik gaan. Hierdie menslikheid is 'n nalatenskap vir hulle nasate om op voort te bou.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Indiërimigrasie; kultuur; Wellington

## Introduction

A significant amount of scholarly attention has been directed at the life experiences of first- and second-generation Indian-born South Africans.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a meaningful number of life story accounts of prominent South African Indians exist.<sup>3</sup> Added to this corpus is a substantial literature base dealing with Indian cultural, social and political experiences by the historians Ashwin Desai

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- 2 CA Woods, *The Indian community of Natal: Their economic position* (Cape Town, 1954); M Palmer, *The history of Indians in Natal* (Durban, 1957); M Mitha, Indian minorities in South Africa (Unpublished MA thesis, Johannesburg), 1968; F Meer, *Portraits of Indian South Africans* (Durban, 1969); RA Hill, *The impact of race legislation on kinship and identity amongst Indian Muslims in Cape Town* (Cape Town, 1974); E Pahad, "The development of Indian political movements in South Africa, 1924-1946" (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Sussex), 1972; FN Ginwala, *Class consciousness and control: The Indian South Africans 1860-1946* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Oxford), 1974; DJ Venter, *The social and economic consequences of the Group Areas legislation for the South African Indian Community* (Unpublished MCom thesis Johannesburg), 1978; NM Raju, *The official launching of the South African Indian Congress* (Unpublished BA (Hons), Durban), 1984; V Bickford-Smith, *The impact of European and Asian immigration on Cape Town, 1880-1910* (Cape Town, 1987).
  - 3 K Goonam, *Coolie doctor: An autobiography* (Hyderabad, 1998); F Meer, *Prison diary* (Cape Town, 2001); IC Meer, *A fortunate man* (Cape Town, 2002); F Meer, *Fatima Meer: Memories of love and struggle* (Cape Town, 2017).

and Goolam Vahed.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in 2015, Parbavati Rama received a doctorate from the University of the Western Cape for a thesis entitled “A forgotten diaspora: Forced Indian migration to the Cape Colony,<sup>5</sup> 1658 to 1834”.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scant attention was given to Indian history outside Natal.<sup>7</sup>

However, during the past two decades, there has been an increasing historical focus on Indian history in Cape Town, South Africa.<sup>8</sup>

This study expands on this historiography by reconstructing a socio-historical narrative of Esop Suliman (1863-1938), a Muslim-born immigrant from Surat, India, who resided in Wellington, South Africa, between 1900 and 1903 and then again from 1909 until 1938. Through extensive archival searches and informal conversations, an attempt was made to uncover the manner in which an early 20<sup>th</sup> century non-Anglo-Saxon immigrant in rural Cape colonial society mapped out cultural and social pathways in a colonial world where he was continually being ‘‘ousted’’. Information about Suliman’s contemporaries was added to this research in order to enhance the historical representation of these socio-cultural pathways.

Esop Suliman was part of a marginal community in Wellington’s Cape colonial and post-colonial society. It was marginal in two primary ways: Firstly, Cape Indians in Wellington, who were mainly Muslim with the exception of one Hindu family, found themselves marginalised by mainstream Christian society. Secondly, they were also fewer in number than their Natal compatriots and therefore adopted different forms of cultural assimilation into Cape society.

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- 4 A Desai & G Vahed, *Inside Indian indenture* (Johannesburg, 2010); A Desai & G Vahed, *Chatsworth. The making of a South African township* (Scottsville, 2013); A Desai, *Indian South Africans and the Black Consciousness Movement under apartheid, Diaspora Studies*, 8(1), 2015, pp 37-50; G Vahed & A Desai, *Stuck in the middle? Indians in South Africa’s fading rainbow, South Asian Diaspora*, 9(2), 2017, pp 147-162.
  - 5 Prior to 1910, South Africa was comprised of two British-controlled colonies, the Cape and Natal, and two independent Boer republics, the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek and Oranje Vrijstaat. After 1910, South Africa became a union comprising four provinces, Cape, Natal, Transvaal (formerly Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek) and Orange Free State (formerly Oranje Vrijstaat).
  - 6 P Rama, *A forgotten diaspora: Forced Indian migration to the Cape Colony, 1658 to 1834* (Unpublished PhD dissertation Bellville), 2015.
  - 7 Two works worth mentioning are CM Brand, *Solidarity patterns in a minority group: A study of the Indian community of the Cape Peninsula* (Unpublished MA thesis), 1966; Z Dawood, “Making a community: Indians in Cape Town, circa 1900-1980s” (Unpublished Master’s thesis Cape Town), 1993.
  - 8 Two notable works of Dhupelia-Mesthrie on the subject include U Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Cape Indians, apartheid and higher education, Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 31(1), 2013, pp 45-74; U Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gujarati shoemakers in twentieth-century Cape Town: Family, gender, caste and community, Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38(1), 2012, pp 1-16.

In partial response to the socialist and peace campaigner, EP Thompson, the historian Nigel Penn asked, “Why bother to rescue such people from the enormous condescension of posterity considering their life stories have laid gathering dust in the archives?” He answered, “Their stories are intrinsically fascinating human dramas, replete with tragic twists ...”<sup>9</sup> Esop Suliman and his compatriots shared a common bond of victimisation and discrimination at the hands of bigoted racists in broader South African colonial society. In their time, there existed an anti-Asiatic Movement and a European Protection Association in Pietermaritzburg that urged the Natal colonial government to enter into negotiations with the other colonies to limit the immigration of Indians into South Africa.<sup>10</sup> Once in South Africa, Indians came to realise that they were discriminated against not only by white people but also by sections of the black populace. In this regard, a prominent Indian personality in Cape Town, SH Rahim, wrote as follows in the *S.A. Clarion*: “Indians have their own grievances and endeavour by constitutional means to redress them. In the doing of this, have they ever had one iota of assistance or even sympathy from the coloured people?”<sup>11</sup>

The case of Esop Suliman and other Indian immigrants in Wellington shed light on how early 20<sup>th</sup>-century minorities in Wellington entered social and cultural spaces and created webs in colonial environments. Their personal circumstances can also be used to test previous research-based conclusions that Cape Indians valued independence.<sup>12</sup> In order to achieve this, archival material was gathered from the Western Cape Archives and Records and Services (WCARS) and the National Library of South-Africa – Cape Town campus (NLSA-CT). However, state archives on their own are limited in creating colonial resistance narratives because they produce pre-packaged communities with labels and postal addresses.<sup>13</sup> What a progressive historian should do is create a new history that radically reshapes the understanding of colonial, apartheid and global ways of being. Therefore, it is necessary also to visit the experiences of private spaces of the colonial subject.<sup>14</sup> It has been well established that no written and oral sources, including those informing studies such as the present one, are free of

9 N Penn, *Rogues, rebels and runaways. Eighteenth-century Cape characters* (Cape Town, 1999), p 2.

10 SH Rahim, Indians in Natal, *The Cape Times*, 1897-01-16, p. 5.

11 SH Rahim, Are the Indians our friends? *S.A. Clarion*, 1919-09-13, p. 16.

12 Z Dawood, “Making a community...”, p. 61.

13 P Lulu, Recalling community, refiguring archive, in B Bennett, C Julius and C Soudien (eds.), *City Site. Museum. Reviewing memory practices at the District Six Museum* (Cape Town, 2008) p 165.

14 M Perot, Introduction, in M Perot (ed.), *A history of private life. From the fires of revolution to the Great War* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 1.

bias.<sup>15</sup> The author admits to having family ties to the main characters of this study and therefore might have fallen into the trap of romanticising events that might otherwise have escaped the notice of another researcher. I admit therefore to being a great-grandson of Esop Suliman. My initial curiosity about Esop Suliman was triggered by his daughter, Fatimah Small, my grandmother and the mother of Adam Small, whom I knew for 26 years, from my birth until her death. Therefore, there is a subjective point of entry into this study and I on occasion take the liberty of making statements without the necessary documentary evidence. I, the author, am the ideal person to tell this story since I have better access to and interpretation ability of sources and am inevitably more interested in this particular history. I attempt to relate this family history with my scholarly historical tools in a balanced, contextualised and accountable way.



**Image 1: Author with Fatimah Small (née Suliman) over 21 years**  
(Source: Author's private collection, 1967)



**Image 2: Author with Fatimah Small (née Suliman) over 21 years**  
(Source: Author's private collection, 1988)

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15 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 2.

## Indian history in Wellington

The officially researched history of South Africa's Indian community dates back to 1860 when indentured labourers came to Natal, often living and working in miserable and disgraceful conditions. They were followed by passenger Indians who came to South Africa to trade.<sup>16</sup> The distinction between passenger and indentured Indians was that the former were mainly Muslims, were attracted to South Africa by the potential for trade and the men remained in contact with their wives and families in India who later came to join them.<sup>17</sup> These merchant class Indians in the Cape Colony often shaped their identity around a middle-class consciousness even though their material conditions were sometimes very similar to those of the working class.<sup>18</sup>

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a handful of Indians had settled in Wellington in the Cape Colony. Wellington was an isolated rural hamlet when the Bain's Kloof Pass was opened in 1853, connecting this town with Worcester. That year, a Russian visitor, Ivan Goncharov, noted that there were no "lower class blacks or indigenous people, only Dutch, and Dutch speaking French descendants and some English in Wellington".<sup>19</sup> Goncharov's account confirms the idea that the colonisation project "aimed to render some opaque and knowable, and others [usually blacks] transparent and invisible".<sup>20</sup> Prospects for material acquisition in Wellington increased from 1863 due to the opening of the Cape Town-Wellington railway line.<sup>21</sup> This drew middle-class aspirants to the village, amongst them Hadjie Abdurahman, father of the later African Political Organisation president Abdullah Abdurahman.<sup>22</sup> By 1902, a visitor to Wellington reported that most coloured<sup>23</sup> inhabitants owned comfortable homes and a few even luxurious ones.<sup>24</sup>

16 E Pahad, "The development of Indian political movements in South Africa...", pp 11, 13.

17 E Pahad, "The development of Indian political movements in South Africa...", p 11.

18 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 64; H Trotter, *Cape Town. A place between* (Cape Town, 2019), p 89.

19 B Gorelik, *An entirely different world. Russian visitors to the Cape, 1797-1870* (Cape Town, 2015), pp 54, 86.

20 H Snyders, Subservient jester? Gasant ('Gamat') Ederoos Behardien: Reinterpreting a marginal figure in South African sport history, in FJ Cleophas (ed.), *Exploring decolonisation themes in SA sport history: Issues and challenges* (Stellenbosch, 2018), p 25.

21 Cape of Good Hope Agricultural Society, *Annual report for 1861 and 1862* (Cape Town, 1862), p 8.

22 Death of Hadjie Abdurahman, *A.P.O. Official Organ of the African People's Organisation*, 1920-07-24.

23 This source, the *S.A. Spectator*, was the newspaper directed by a Cape Town-based African American-born politician, Francis Perigrino. Perigrino used the term "coloured" as it was used in America, referring to black people in general.

24 Anon., A trip to Wellington, *S.A. Spectator*, 1902-12-06.

From the mid-1890s, media reports about the large ‘influx’ of Indians in the greater Boland area appeared.<sup>25</sup> This was due to the greater economic opportunities in the Cape compared with those in India where a combination of crises in the rural economy, heavy taxation and the caste system precipitated a flow of people to South Africa in search of economic betterment.<sup>26</sup> In South Africa, Indians were subjected to harsh racism and in Pretoria, for example, the Town Council compiled a report in 1897 on how to segregate the Indian community.<sup>27</sup> The situation was not much better for Indians in the Boland region, and in 1908, only seven Indians had general dealer’s licences in Wellington. In 1910, there were only four.<sup>28</sup> For many Cape Indians, the nonissue of trading licences was not only a financial obstacle but also an issue of status that loomed large since they enjoyed the vote and could be elected as local councillors.<sup>29</sup>

The Muslim community in Wellington kept no archival records of early 20<sup>th</sup> century births, marriages and deaths, and thus the historian has to rely on oral accounts for such information. Fortunately for the researcher, some rural Indians left traces of business transactions and some owned fixed property that found their way into the public archive through (often incomplete) death notices and other legal documents. These documents provide insight into the social and economic challenges that passenger Indians faced. At least two cases of Indian shopkeepers in Wellington who went insolvent or faced financial difficulties at this time, Moosa Esop and Mohamed Ismail, are recorded in the WCARS.<sup>30</sup>

### **Esop Suliman’s Indian contemporaries in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Wellington society**

#### ***Moosa Esop***

A brief archival overview of Moosa Esop (also known as Esop Moosa), an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian in Wellington, reveals his point of entry into the Colony and further details about his marriage, travel, sympathetic white support and change of surname. Moosa Esop made use of a general agent, Goolam Hoosen.<sup>31</sup> According to a permit application and other archival documents, Moosa Esop was born in 1886 in the district of Broach (currently Bharuch), India, and entered the Transvaal from Delagoa Bay (currently Maputo) in 1906.<sup>32</sup> Three months

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25 Z Dawood, “Making a community...”, p 10.

26 Z Dawood, “Making a community...”, p 61.

27 The Transvaal, *The Cape Times*, 1897-01-16, p 5.

28 Western Cape Archives and Record Services, (hereafter WCARS), CSC, 2/6/1/377 194: Motion. Esop Sulamon – Municipal Council of Wellington, 1910-03-09.

29 E Pahad, “The development of Indian political movements in South Africa...”, p. 34.

30 WCARS, T1201, 3982: Esop, Moosa, Wellington: Removal licence, 1909.

31 WCARS, T1201, 3982: Esop, Moosa, Wellington: Removal licence, 1909.

32 WCARS, IRC, 1/1/84 2085A: Immigration Papers, Mr Esop Moosa, 1907-1914.

later in 1907, he entered the Cape Colony by train as a 20-year-old.<sup>33</sup> Both his parents had passed away at the time. It appears that Moosa Esop's brother-in-law, Adam Essa, assisted him in obtaining the permit for entry into the Cape Colony. Moosa Esop was the son of Moosa Mohammed, who could not write any English and resided in Johannesburg from 1895 to 1899. Possibly due to the outbreak of the South African War, Moosa Mohammed moved to Cape Town and started a fruit hawker's business at 30 Muir Street, leaving his son behind in the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR).<sup>34</sup>

Because merchant Indians often displayed a strong sense of independence, preferring to be self-employed, they were dependent on fragile community networks that included other Indians and sympathetic white people. This was evident in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century experience of Moosa Esop. A certain Hassen Abrahams carried out business in Front Street, Wellington, as a general dealer under a licence taken out by Moosa Esop. Abrahams took out the licence for the Front Street shop on 15 January 1909, but his goods were attached for debt on 25 March and sold on 23 April.<sup>35</sup> Indians took long to recover from debt, if they ever did. It was recorded that in 1913, Moosa Esop's assets amounted to £26 while his liabilities amounted to £130.<sup>36</sup> Esop left Wellington and settled in Carnarvon, presumably from 21 April 1911 onwards.<sup>37</sup>

Early Indian immigrants in Wellington could mitigate the effects of such harsh economic circumstances by finding space in existing cultural landscapes. Therefore, unlike urban Cape Town-based Indians who married Malay women,<sup>38</sup> Indians in outlying areas often married local Christian women. Thus, Moosa Esop married Catherina Elizabeth Koning (a Christian woman) in Lower-Paarl, Cape Province, in 1911, according to Muslim rites. Rural Cape Indians were conscious of the necessity for "respectable conduct" that could be relied upon when seeking sympathetic white assistance when the need arose. Such a need arose for Moosa Esop when he applied to the Chief Immigration Officer of the Department of the Interior in 1913 for a permit under the Immigration Act. The application went through his solicitor, WD Bosman, who wrote out the application as follows: "Here is a certain Indian Coolie who desires to proceed with his wife and family to India for a year or so".<sup>39</sup>

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33 WCARS, IRC, 1/1/84 2085A: Immigration Papers, Mr Esop Moosa, 1907-1914.

34 WCARS, IRC, 1/1/84 2085A: Immigration Papers, Mr Esop Moosa, 1907-1914.

35 WCARS, T1201, 3982: Esop, Moosa, Wellington: Removal licence, 1909.

36 WCARS, IRC, 1/1/84 2085A: Immigration Papers, Mr Esop Moosa, 1907-1914.

37 WCARS, IRC, 1/1/84 2085A: Immigration Papers, Mr Esop Moosa, 1907-1914.

38 E Pahad, "The development of Indian political movements in South Africa...", p 20.

39 WCARS, IRC, 1/1/84 2085A: Immigration Papers, Mr Esop Moosa, 1907-1914.





**Image 3: First-generation Indian community in Wellington**

**First generation migrants from India: Cassiem Esop Malla standing at back right (with fez)**

(Source: Ansaaf Suliman, descendent of Esop Suliman)

A Member of the Provincial Council, AG Visser, who was also a medical doctor and a well-known Afrikaans poet, supported Moosa Esop's application for travel.<sup>40</sup> The marriage proved to be a business lifeline for Moosa Esop who later owned fixed property in his wife's name to whom he was married out of community of property.<sup>41</sup> Another way of ensuring survival in a hostile environment was by "turning truth". Thus, when Moosa Esop was living in Carnarvon in 1913 and he applied for a permit for travel, the magistrate claimed that he was fraudulent in declaring his parents' whereabouts.<sup>42</sup> Through conducting a case study of the life of Esop Suliman and his family in Wellington, an attempt was made to show that Moosa Esop's experience was not an isolated case and that there were common features of point of entry into the Colony, cross-cultural marriage, travel, occasional sympathetic white support, insolvency and change of surname.

40 WCARS, IRC, 1/1/84 2085A: Immigration Papers, Mr Esop Moosa, 1907-1914.

41 WCARS, IRC, 1/1/84 2085A: Immigration Papers, Mr Esop Moosa, 1907-1914.

42 WCARS, IRC, 1/1/84 2085A: Immigration Papers, Mr Esop Moosa, 1907-1914.

**DEATH NOTICE.**

No. 60985

PURSUANT TO THE PROVISIONS CONTAINED IN "THE ADMINISTRATION OF ESTATES ACT, 1913."

NO. 60985

Master's Office, Capetown.

1. Name of the deceased **ESOP SULIMAN** *MR*

2. Birthplace and Nationality of the deceased **Karmala in India: Indian**

3. Names and Addresses of the Parents of the deceased  
 { Father **Suliman Suliman**  
 Mother **Unknown**

4. Age of the deceased **75** years . . . months.

5. Occupation in life of the deceased, or, if a woman, of her husband **Shopkeeper**

6. Ordinary place of residence of the deceased, or, if a woman, of her husband  
 { **Front Street, Wellington**

7. Married or unmarried, widower or widow **Widower**

(a) Name of surviving spouse (if any), and whether married in community of property or not  
 { **Amina Esop Suliman born Heswick**

(b) Name or Names and approximate date of death of pre-deceased spouse or spouses  
 { **23 June 1930** *29304*

(c) Place of last marriage **Wellington**

8. The day of the decease: On **29th. August 1938** 19\_\_

9. Where the person died ...  
 { House **Front Street, Wellington**  
 Town or Place **Wellington**  
 District **Paarl**

10. Names of children of deceased, and whether majors or minors  
 { **1. Ebrahim Esop Suliman (Major)**  
**2. Asa Suliman** "  
**3. Fatima Suliman** "  
**4. Magmoet Suliman** "  
**5. Razeel Suliman** **Minor**  
**6. Jochra Suliman** "  
**7. Esmail Suliman** "  
**8. Mariam Suliman** "  
**9. Suliman Esop Suliman (Major)**  
**10. Cassiem Esop Suliman (Major)**

11. Has the deceased left any movable property? **Yes**

12. Has the deceased left any immovable property? **Yes**

13. Is it estimated that the estate exceeds £300 in value? **Yes**

14. Has the deceased left a will? **Yes**

Dated at **Wellington** the **7** day of **September** 19 **38**

(Signature) *E. E. Suliman*   
 Son: **Yes** ~~NRAX~~ at deathbed

State separately the children born of different marriages, and give the date of birth of each minor. Names must be written out in full. If there are no children, and either or both parents be dead, then give the names and addresses of the brothers and sisters of the deceased.

(State in what capacity and whether at the time at or near the place of death.)

This notice must be filled up and signed by the Nearest Relative or Connection of the Deceased, who shall, at the time, be at or near the place of death—or in the absence of such near Relative or Connection, by the person who, at or immediately after the death, shall have the chief charge of the house in, or the place on, which the death occurred, and must be sent either to the Master, or, if the death occurred in a district subject to a local magistracy, to the Magistrate of the district.

(Source: Western Cape Archive and Record Services)

## ***Esop Suliman***

According to Dawood, the Cape Indian community tended to value independence by choosing shop keeping above wage labour.<sup>43</sup> The shop keeping profession among Indian families was entwined with community practices. For example, credit networks were commonplace and community members of the economically poorer classes often ‘bought on the book’ without any interest because Islam forbade it.<sup>44</sup> These factors made them an indispensable part of the community, and although they were often subjected to racist legislation, they were treated differently than other ethnic groups. Cape Indian merchants were drawn largely from the Gujurati Hindu and Muslim communities from north and west India.<sup>45</sup> Esop Suliman fitted this description.

According to his death notice, he was born in the west coast city of Karmala, India, and was the son of Suliman Suliman and an unknown mother.<sup>46</sup> Details about his life in India are unknown, except for his daughter Razoel’s casual remark once that her father was born in the village of Karachi. It is doubtful that the family surname was Suliman when he entered the Colony; it was probably adopted for immigration purposes since it was customary for Indians to change their traditionally long surnames to easier understandable pronunciations in Cape colonial society. Moreover, one of Esop Suliman’s sons from his marriage in India carried the surname Malla.<sup>47</sup>

A court case provides details of his presence during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Cape Colony. This case shows that he resided in Wellington between 1901 and 1903 with his two minor sons (Suliman and Cassim).<sup>48</sup> Esop Suliman and his two sons were thus part of a small group of first-generation immigrants to Wellington from India. It is unknown how he arrived in Wellington in 1901, but the village was an unwelcoming location for Asians. His decision to choose Wellington, a Calvinist town where the Dutch Reformed Church was influential in shaping public opinion, was daring. A ‘safer’ option would have been the nearby village of Paarl with an established Muslim community that had had property-owning families since 1834 and an organised religious congregation by 1850.<sup>49</sup>

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43 Z Dawood, “Making a community...”, p 60.

44 Z Dawood, “Making a community...”, p 64.

45 Z Dawood, “Making a community...”, p 24.

46 WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/5154 60985: Suliman, Esop. Estate Papers, 1938-09-12.

47 WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/20162 5362/52: Malla, Cassim Esop. Estate Papers, 1952-08-13.

48 : Motion. Esop Sulamon – Municipal Council of Wellington, 1910-03-09.

49 E-mail conversation with M Kamedien (Community Historian), 2019-12-16.

The South African War (1899-1902) was raging, and when Indians entered the Cape Colony from the ZAR in 1899, they were placed in tents in Dock Road after being stripped of their possessions by Boers at the border. When disease broke out in 1901, they were moved to Maitland, from where the Maitland Municipality evicted them at the first opportunity and they drifted into overcrowded District Six.<sup>50</sup> This was prior to the General Dealers Act of 1906 that prevented Indians, in particular, from obtaining general dealers' or hawkers' licences freely, and some Indians infiltrated outlying rural areas to set up shop as general dealers there.<sup>51</sup> The effect of this act was expressed by an Indian spokesperson who estimated that there were some 5 000 Indians in Cape Town's suburbs before 1906 but that by 1908, there were fewer than 2 000 persons.<sup>52</sup> After the South African War, the Transvaal Colony (the former ZAR) remained an unwelcoming place for Indians and Lord Milner said that "... the Asiatics (sic) are strangers forcing themselves on a community reluctant to accept them".<sup>53</sup> Indian leaders in the Cape Colony responded by organising themselves into a colonial organisation in 1907, calling for political unity among "Christian, Mohammedan, Hindoo (sic) and Parsee".<sup>54</sup>

According to the unpublished thesis of Rosemary Hill, "New passenger Indians interested in trading ... to avoid over competition in Natal ... came to the Cape directly from India".<sup>55</sup> It is therefore assumed that because Esop Suliman was a passenger Indian, not indentured, he entered the Cape Colony directly from India.<sup>56</sup> No evidence could be found of his entry into the Cape Colony, but family folklore has it that he entered the colony with his two sons, "the youngest, Cassim, being on the arm". This was unusual because "men emigrated from their towns and only once established, invariably in trading, did they return to fetch their sons and, even later, their wives".<sup>57</sup> After the South African War, however, racist legislation tightened around Indian immigration into the Cape Colony. The Immigration Act of 1906 permitted immigrants into the Cape Colony providing they could "write and sign a European language".<sup>58</sup> This counted against some Indians such as another Esop Suliman in the Cape Colony from Port Elizabeth,

50 V Bickford-Smith, E van Heyningen & N Worden, *Cape Town in the twentieth century. An illustrated social history* (Cape Town, 1999), p 13.

51 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", pp 32, 33, 38.

52 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 42.

53 E Pahad, "The development of Indian political movements in South Africa...", p 19.

54 Indian Conference, *The Cape Times*, 1907-07-07, p 6.

55 RA Hill, "The impact of race legislation on kinship and identity amongst Indian Muslims in Cape Town" (Unpublished MA thesis, Cape Town), 1980, p 29.

56 RA Hill, "The impact of race legislation...", p 29; Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 9.

57 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 12.

58 NLSA-CT, Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, *Acts of Parliament. Session of 1906. Being the third session of the eleventh parliament* (Cape Town, 1906), pp 5134-5135.

who ran a business in North End and was declared insolvent in 1903. The court appraiser stated, "The books of the insolvent are all in the Indian language and impossible to understand".<sup>59</sup> The act made provision for Yiddish to be regarded as a European language but not any of the Asiatic languages.

Archival records show that after Esop Suliman resided in Wellington between 1901 and 1903 he stayed in Worcester from 1905 to 1909 where he had a general dealer's business at 34 Parker Street. He was married and had two minor sons. His wife, Amina (not to be confused with his wife that he married in South Africa), was in India with a permit to enter the Cape Colony, and he was solvent with no criminal offence.<sup>60</sup> This was typical of the chain immigration of passenger Indians in which family networks often secured accommodation for new arrivals, thus providing emotional support during the initial period of adjustment.<sup>61</sup> According to Cassim's death notice, his parents were, however, Esop and Amina Malla, not Suliman.<sup>62</sup> Esop Suliman acquired the general dealer's business of Moosa Esop in Front Street, Wellington, in 1909. He gave notice, as required by law, in the *Cape Times* of 22 December 1909 and on 24 December in the *Government Gazette* of his intention to apply to the Wellington Municipal Council for a certificate authorising the transfer of Moosa Esop's general dealer's licence.<sup>63</sup> Six of the nine members of the council met on 21 January 1910 and considered and refused Esop Suliman's application. The application was turned down by six of the nine council members. Three were absent. Prior to this date, however, after the required expiry of 14 days, attorney HP Burger had written on behalf of Esop Suliman on 18 January 1910 to the Wellington Municipality for the certificate. The municipal secretary replied to Burger on the same day, stating that the application had been refused and no reasons had been supplied, although demanded. Burger then mentioned how the number of licenced Indian shopkeepers had dwindled from seven to four between 1909 and 1910. He went on to show that the community at large did not object to Esop Suliman's application, and therefore he believed that there was no valid reason for the refusal of the certificate.<sup>64</sup> The town clerk, DS Brink, informed Suliman's solicitor, Alex Dichmont, that no reasons needed to be supplied for the refusal since none were required.<sup>65</sup> This displayed the common attitude of trade jealousy held by white colonial shopkeepers and

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59 WCARS, MOIB, 2/2598 89: Copy Insolvent Estate of Esop Suliman, 1903-04-29.

60 WCARS: Motion. Esop Sulamon – Municipal Council of Wellington, 1910-03-09.

61 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 7.

62 WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/20162 5362/52: Malla, Cassim Esop. Estate Papers, 1952-08-13.

63 WCARS: Motion. Esop Sulamon – Municipal Council of Wellington, 1910-03-09.

64 WCARS: Motion. Esop Sulamon – Municipal Council of Wellington, 1910-03-09.

65 WCARS: Motion. Esop Sulamon – Municipal Council of Wellington, 1910-03-09.

members of the House of Assembly at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>66</sup> What helped Esop Suliman was the fact that he was a general dealer, not a hawker, and therefore had recourse to the Supreme Court if he wished, as he did, to contest the decisions of any licensing body.<sup>67</sup> Archibald Dichmont appeared on behalf of Esop Suliman in the Supreme Court of the Colony of Good Hope on 9 March 1910. Esop Suliman's application was refused with costs by the court on 29 March 1910.<sup>68</sup> The Wellington Municipality could do this because the General Dealers Act of 1906 implied that "an application could be turned down if two-thirds of the city councillors opposed the application ... unsuccessful applicants had to wait for six months before reapplying for a licence".<sup>69</sup> Further court records indicate that he was declared insolvent in 1921, being indebted to the amount of £191.10.<sup>70</sup> His creditors claimed an amount of £1 919.14.8., while he had insolvent liabilities of £1 629.6.0 at his rehabilitation court appearance in 1923.<sup>71</sup> Court records indicate that his son, Suliman Esop, and a certain Kassiem Moosa, an illiterate Indian, provided surety for him while a certain J le Roux was one of the witnesses in the rehabilitation application.<sup>72</sup> Esop Suliman nevertheless acquired a trading licence, and at his death, he possessed landed property worth £650.<sup>73</sup> This was partly possible because of his marriage to a local woman, Mona Heswick, who became Amina Suliman.

### *Amina Suliman*

A grandson of Esop Suliman, the Afrikaans writer Adam Small, stated, "It was my privilege and remains an advantage for me always: this heritage of ... being between (yes, rather between as inside) two homes ... a Christian and a Muslim home".<sup>74</sup> His mother, Esop Suliman's daughter Fatimah, had a huge impact on his early creative development.<sup>75</sup>

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66 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 43.

67 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 40.

68 WCARS, CSC, 2/6/1/377 194: Motion. Esop Sulamon – Municipal Council of Wellington, 1910-03-09.

69 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 34.

70 WCARS CSC, 2/6/1/606: Motion. Opposed Application. Eaton Robins Ltd. – Esop Suliman. Compulsory Sequestration. WCARS, 1921-04-29.

71 WCARS, CSC, 2/6/1/689 588: Motion. Ex Parte Application of Essop Suliman. Rehabilitation, 1923.

72 WCARS, CSC, 2/6/1/689 588: Motion. Ex Parte Application of Essop Suliman. Rehabilitation, 1923.

73 Deeds Office, Cape Town, no. 4532, 5 May 1939.

74 A Small, Tussen twee huise, in A Botha (ed.), *My Paarl* (Paarl, 1987), p 104.

75 Amina Suliman's daughter, Razoel Adams, drew my attention to this fact in 1993. Esop Suliman, a Muslim, married Mona (later Amina) Heswick (died 23 June 1930), a Christian farmworker, from the farm Mooikelder in Paarl according to Muslim rites. According to her death notice, Amina Suliman was born in 1889.

A relative of Mona Heswick claimed that Mona was the daughter of the married couple Helena Jones and Frederick Heswick.<sup>76</sup> Their children and grandchildren were officially classified Cape Coloured by successive South African governments and social institutions from the 20<sup>th</sup> century till the present.<sup>77</sup> Very little archival evidence could be found of Helena and Frederick Heswick. This is not uncommon for farmworkers whose names never appeared in property records, bank statements, municipal rates accounts and other official documents, and traces of their existence are often only found in the memories of their descendants. In most cases, their narratives can only be constructed from a combination of archival records and unacknowledged informal conversations. Where there are gaps in the stories, they are filled in by the author's educated guesswork informed by the extant evidence.

Grandma Fatimah mentioned to me in passing that Frederick Heswick was a Frenchman who became a dam builder in Paarl after he had jumped ship in the Cape when he met Helena. Frederick's French legacy and occupation as a dam builder was also referred to by his great-grandson, Jakobus Abrahams.<sup>78</sup> If Jakobus Abrahams' and Grandma Fatimah's accounts are true, it is likely that Frederick Heswick's surname would not have been Heswick and that he adopted this surname to blend into the dominant English Cape society.<sup>79</sup>

Amina Suliman with her children and husband formed a family cell with the combination of workplace and residence, Erf 761 in Front Street, Wellington, with the house attached to the shop. She had a child, Helena, out of wedlock who is not mentioned on her death notice. Amina had eight children with Esop Suliman, implying that the Suliman family consisted of a household of 13.<sup>80</sup> This assisted with the incorporation of family labour in the absence of the means to employ other labour, something not uncommon in Indian families.<sup>81</sup> Rural Indian shopkeepers lived in the area and knew the circumstances of

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76 Interview: F Cleophas, researcher Stellenbosch University, Klein Nederburg, Paarl, with Mr J Abrahams, great-grandson of Frederick and Helena Heswick, Paarl: 7 Seine Avenue, Klein Parys, 2015-04-26.

77 WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/3863 29304: Amina Suliman. Estate Papers, 1931-02-20; See also marriage certificate of John William Abrahams and Dora Heswick no. 37474 in the Paarl Magistrate's Office (Author's Private Collection).

78 Interview: Mr J Abrahams..., 2015-04-26.

79 A Heswick's descendant Michelle Heswick is conducting genealogical research into this family and has found various variations of the surname spelling: Heswick, Hushwick, Hustwick, Huiswijk, Hashweck and Hashwick.

80 WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/3863 29304: Amina Suliman. Estate Papers, 1931-02-20; WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/5154 60985: Suliman, Esop. Estate Papers, 1938-09-12.

81 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 66.

their clientele.<sup>82</sup> When Mona Heswick married Esop Suliman, she acquired the designation *motjie*, a common Cape folk name for the wife of an Indian or Malay shop keeper. In Cape colonial society, as elsewhere in the world, the village shop keeper and his wife acted as a parsonage in the neighbourhood, available to serve as witness or confidant.<sup>83</sup>

When Mona Heswick embraced her husband's religion, Islam, she became Amina (not to be confused with the Amina who was Esop's wife in India). At least five of her descendants bear the names Mona and Amina (or their English derivative Jasmine): Jasmine Fourie (born Suliman, granddaughter), Jasmine Binnedel (born Cleophas, great-granddaughter), Mona Moses (born Adams, granddaughter), Mona Plaatjes (born Small, granddaughter) and Mona Cleophas (born Small, granddaughter).

According to Grandma Fatimah and Jamiela Ahmed, a great-granddaughter of Esop Suliman, No. 17 Front Street (erf 761) was a meeting place for visiting Indians to Wellington. There was also a book culture in the house according to the testimonies of Jakobus Abrahams, grandnephew of Amina Suliman and Mona Cleophas (née Small), granddaughter of Esop Suliman. Two incidents bring this point home: Mona Cleophas recalled her mother, Fatimah Small (née Suliman), daughter of Esop and Amina Suliman, telling her that she had once walked a distance of approximately 13 kilometres (in one direction) to Paarl Library to take out books. Jakobus Abrahams recalled an incident relayed to him by his mother that Fatimah had once gone missing. She was eventually found under the bed with a book. Undoubtedly, this book culture was transferred to her son, Adam.

### ***The Suliman children***

Esop Suliman's two sons (Suliman and Cassim) from his marriage in India were traders in Wellington, and both married Christian women. The relatively small Indian population in the Cape (and the even smaller one in Wellington) enjoyed a reasonably privileged political position in relation to the franchise.<sup>84</sup>

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82 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 48.

83 M Perrot, *The family triumphant*, in M Perrot (ed.), *A history of private life. From the fires of revolution to the Great War* (Cambridge, 1990), p 1, 17; Deeds Office, Cape Town, Deed Certificate 761 for Lot no. 38. It is possible that the Suliman family might have resided elsewhere before moving to 17 Front Street.

84 Z Dawood, "Making a community...", p 22.



Thus, both Cassim and Suliman were registered voters.<sup>85</sup> This community was also not free from harbouring prejudices, and one of Esop Suliman's descendants reminded the author that: "We were Surtis, not Koknis, ... Koknis were raucous and dark skinned". However, whatever prejudices that might have been harboured were outweighed by their close proximity to and dependence on people classified as coloured.

Given the small size of the Wellington Indian community, it was inevitable that Esop and Amina Suliman's children would seek marital relationships outside the Muslim religion. Suliman Suliman married twice and had nine children. His first wife was Asia November (1900-1922), the daughter of Carel and Johanna November from Carnarvon.<sup>86</sup> His younger brother, Cassim Malla (also known as Cassim Esop), "a fish hawker in a very small way", married thrice according to Muslim rites before passing away in Claremont, Cape Town, on 6 August 1952. He owned property at 18 Front Street, Wellington. When he applied for a bond to purchase property, a white man, Michael Pentz Burger, stood surety for him. The property was eventually sold to the Wellington Muslim community.<sup>87</sup> According to Jamiela Ahmed the first madrasa in Wellington was built on this property.<sup>88</sup>

Two months before his death, Cassim Malla signed his will with a cross. At the time of his death, he was married to Sharifa and Madegh Cassim according to Muslim rites. The property was bequeathed to Madegh Cassim who sold it to the Wellington Muslim community.<sup>89</sup> His predeceased spouse was Spasie Smit, the daughter of Jacob and Christina Smit. From his marriages, 10 children were born.<sup>90</sup> Prior to being a fish hawker, he was a general dealer in Worcester and was declared insolvent in 1921.<sup>91</sup> It is possible that when a certain A Mohammed from Main Street, Riversdale, applied for a permit on 15 September 1921 from the Immigration Offices in Cape Town for CE Malla to visit Johannesburg, it was for Cassim.<sup>92</sup> His estate papers reveal that his business was all cash and

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85 NLSA-CT, Union of South Africa (1927). Province of the Cape of Good Hope. Voters List, 1927. Electoral Division of Paarl. List of persons qualified to vote at the election of a member of the House of Assembly and of the Provincial Council of the Cape of Good Hope for the electoral division of Paarl, as defined by the fourth delimitation commission (Cape Town, Cape Times, 1927), p 32.

86 WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/2319 1840: Suliman, Asia. Nee November. Estate Papers, 1922-07-15.

87 WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/20162 5362/52: Malla, Cassim Esop. Estate Papers, 1952.

88 Interview: J Ahmed, Great grand daughter of Esop Suliman, Skool Street, Newton, Wellington, South Africa, 2019-03-21..

89 WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/20162 5362/52: Malla, Cassim Esop. Estate Papers, 1952.

90 WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/20162 5362/52: Malla, Cassim Esop. Estate Papers, 1952.

91 WCARS, CSC, 2/6/1/610 621.

92 WCARS, IRC, 1/1/501 9038A: Immigration Papers. A Mohamed and Ce Malla, 1921-09-17.

some “coloured persons owing him three pounds”.<sup>93</sup> Initially, Esop Suliman’s sons, except one, were independent shopkeepers or hawkers. The sons from the second marriage gave up their independence and became wage labourers.<sup>94</sup>

Mona Heswick’s marriage to Esop Suliman also enabled her daughters Helena, Asa, Fatimah, Razoel, Jochra and Miriam (Ragmat) to enter middle-class society and indulge in public displays of elegance. Various photographs in private possession indicate that Amina Suliman’s sons had the opportunity to participate in rugby and cricket. Her sons Ebrahim, Magmoet and Esmail played cricket for the Protea Club in Wellington. The eldest son, Ebrahim, played rugby for the Roslins Rugby Football Club, also in Wellington.



**Image 8: Western Province Country Cricket Union, Protea Cricket Club, Winners of League and Knock-Out competition 1941-1942**

**Back row: David Davids, Magmoet Suliman, Apols (Full names unidentified), Llewlyn (Klaas) Goodwin, ‘Soppie’ Pretorius, ‘Ouboeit’ Cupido, Alfie Batts**

**Middle row: Legolie (Full names unidentified), Jan ‘Trepens’, Tienie Abrahams, Ebrahim Suliman, ‘Sinie’ Ztriezers, Andrew Bushby, Tom Abrahams**

**Front row: Jan Adonis, Yssie Suliman**

(Source: Yusuf Sulliman)

Generally, women were not encouraged to move beyond the role of homemaker in the 1930s. The lack of sport participation and physical culture amongst

93 WCARS, MOOC, 6/9/20162 5362/52: Malla, Cassim Esop. Estate Papers, 1952.

94 A Small, Tussen twee huise, in A Botha (ed.), *My Paarl*, p 103.

Indian girls does not indicate an absence of involvement, though. According to Grandma Fatima's testimony, it was her and her sisters' responsibility to wash and iron the cricket shirts and trousers of her brothers who played for the Protea Cricket Club. This was not uncommon in cricket clubs, and Harold Arenz, a St Augustine's player, recalled:<sup>95</sup>

*... on a Saturday afternoon when I come home from cricket, my things were put in the basket. There's always a basket there. I go into the basket, first thing Monday morning, it will be washed and it will be ready for the next week. Couldn't afford two sets, two outfits you know. That outfit I had on today must be okay for the following week... we must never forget, what the women have done for this club. When there was a party. When there was a dance. Whether it was presentation. They were the ones who did the dirty work, who did the catering, they were always there, for the club you know ....*

## Conclusion

This study created a narrative of the life of Esop Suliman (1863-1938), how he was represented in archival material at the time and what his legacy is. Although it is not possible to deduce common features of an Indian community based on the limited number of case studies in this research, a historical narrative of immigrant figures was created that could serve as source material for comparative studies in other parts of the world.

In essence, it was shown how Esop Suliman's attempts at setting up a business were determined by the ability to establish social networks across cultural divide. It is possible that his experiences in segregated Cape society did not differ greatly from those of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century minority groupings elsewhere in the world, for example Cubans in Puerto Rico, Japanese in America, Indians in East Africa, and Chinese, Jews and Greeks in South Africa. Neither do his experiences differ from those of Burundian, Chinese, Congolese, Nigerian, Somali and Zimbabwean families in present-day Wellington.<sup>96</sup> What this study revealed was that Esop Suliman survived by forging significant social, economic and marital networks that renders any discussion around an exclusive Indian identity obsolete and outdated. It therefore confirms a finding by Rosemary Hill, mentioned earlier in this study, that "Indian tradition is not merely a cultural relic, but rather a set of symbols used in a new context for mobilising groups".<sup>97</sup> Simply put, Esop Suliman mapped a survival path for himself through displays of social and cultural fluidity that has left a legacy worth remembering.

95 Interview: H Arenz, Lansdowne (St Augustine Cricket Club Life Member), 2009-07-07.

96 H Trotter, *Cape Town...*, p 90.

97 RA Hill, "The impact of race legislation...", p ii.