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Hypothesis on a Parsi Community in Tamatave in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

ABSTRAKTI / ABSTRACT

Although there are already several significant works on the Parsi Zoroastrian diaspora in the panorama of historical research, many communities, stories, and aspects still remain unknown or little studied. In 1898, Delphine Menant mentioned two Parsis, partners of the London-based Parsi company Dadabhoj & C., in Madagascar. The information given by the French scholar, however, has not been followed up in more recent academic publications. This paper focuses on some British archival documents that would demonstrate a Parsi presence in Tamatave, since the 1870s. Through the study of some letters relating to the inheritance of a Parsi priest, the comparison with the later text of Menant and taking into consideration the larger Parsi community in Mauritius, it is possible to hypothesize a small community in the Malagasy coastal city. The article is also intended to be an invitation to other studies of the issue.

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The Parsi diaspora

The¹ European colonization of India presented its Parsi community with the opportunity to redefine its social and economic role in the subcontinent and beyond. The Parsis (i.e., ‘Persians’) – heirs of Zoroastrian refugees who fled from Persia and landed on the coast of Gujarat perhaps in the eighth or tenth century² – became part of the cultural and economic elite of the Raj and the Empire in the nineteenth century.³ New communities sprang up in the main cities of India⁴ and in Ceylon,⁵ but also further east, in Southeast Asia⁶ and China,⁷ as well as westward, along the Indian Ocean coasts of southern Arabia (Aden)⁸ and Africa. John R. Hinnells is undoubtedly the one who has addressed the issue best. In 2005, the British scholar published a fundamental work on Zoroastrian communities around the world. A part of the book by the talented pupil of Mary Boyce is also dedicated to the history of the Parsi communities in East Africa, in particular on the island of Zanzibar and in present-day Kenya.⁹ Nevertheless, Hinnells made no mention of Parsi communities in Madagascar in his work.

Another book dedicated to the question of Parsi communities edited by Hinnells and Alan Williams was published in 2008.¹⁰ In his chapter about the “Bombay Parsi Merchants in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” Rusheed R. Wadia wrote:

“By the end of the eighteenth century Bombay had become the premier commercial center of western India. From Basra, Muscat and other parts of the Persian Gulf came pearls, raw silk, carmenia wool, dates and rose water. Arabia was a source of coffee, gold, drugs and honey. Bombay ships also ferried spices, perfumes and sugar from Java, Sumatra and the Malacca Straits. Ties of trade also linked the eastern coast of Africa to Bombay. Madagascar, Mozambique and parts of the east coast provided ivory, slaves and drugs. Every year a large number of ships from Bombay carried raw cotton to China and returned with tea, sugar, porcelain, silk, nankins and a range of commercial items. Among the most important items of export from Bombay in the eighteenth century were ‘Surat goods’, pepper and ‘cotton wool’. ‘Surat goods’ were piece-goods made in Broach, Jambusar and other towns of Gujarat.”¹¹

This is the only reference in the book to the great African island.¹²

The inheritance of a Parsi priest

As is evident, therefore, the main studies on Zoroastrian communities outside India and Persia in contemporary times seem to ignore the presence of Parsis in Madagascar. Still, we can not forget that already Delphine Menant, in her renowned work *Les parsis : histoire des communautés zoroastriennes de l’Inde* published in 1898, had mentioned the presence of “P. Bebramji de Londres et D. F. Vacha” – two of the partners of Dadabhoy & C., the main Parsi company in London – “à Tamatave, à Madagascar, à Antananarivo et à Vatoomady” at the end of the 19th century.¹³ The exact year of their arrival in Madagascar is not indicated by the French scholar. In any case, the author referred to the last years of the nineteenth century. In that period, according to Menant, a steamer of the company – the “Helvetia” – traveled the route between Madagascar and the island of Mauritius.¹⁴

By studying some Foreign Office documents kept at The National Archives (London, Kew), I found at least two other Parsis who had presumably arrived earlier. Indeed, several letters show the presence of a Parsi priest, Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee, a native of Surat who died in Tamatave in February 1880.¹⁵ In particular, the letters concern his legacy. Indeed, on March 23, 1882, his wife Koonverbai and

daughter Nawazbai wrote to James Braithwaite Peile, formerly acting municipal commissioner in Bombay,¹⁶ for help in obtaining their inheritance under Parsi law.¹⁷ There are several letters on the issue at least until the autumn of 1883, without however clarifying the success of the request.¹⁸ The letter of March 1882, however, is interesting because it gives us quite detailed information on the relocation – first to Mauritius and then to Madagascar –, the activity of Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee in the city of Tamatave and also the transfer of the widow's brother on the island at the beginning of the 1880s:

“A Parsee priest, named Pestonjee Manekjee, a native subject of Her Majesty and an inhabitant of Surat, went to the Island of Mauritius, in the first instance, and afterwards to Madagascar, for purposes of trade in a small way. [...] His last letter was dated only a few months before his death, which we have been given to understand, took place on or about the 12th February, 1880.

3. Understanding that he had left some property, consisting among other sundry things of about four or six houses or bungalows, worth between 2,000 and 3,000 rupees, in Tamatave, which he used to rent out to European gentlemen, and in the absence of any testamentary disposition of his property by the deceased under his hand, such as is recognized by the Parsee Act of Succession No. 21 of 1865, or the Indian Succession Act No. 10 of 1865, or by the general law of nations. We, the Undersigned, who are respectively the widow and daughter (the only child) of the deceased, were much exercised in our minds as to the way in which, as the only rightful heirs, under the Parsee Act No. 21 of 1865, section 6, and the Indian Succession Act No. 10 of 1865, we should secure to ourselves the said property of our deceased relative. The Island of Madagascar being such an out-of-the-way and far-distant place, having little or no intercourse with persons residing in Surat, aggravated as our position was, in consequence of our being solitary, helpless, poor widows, ignorant of the world and its ways, we were reduced to utter despair, when fortunately the full brother of one of us, Koonverbai, went out, as the servant of some other persons, to this very place of Tamatave.”¹⁹

A Parsi Zoroastrian community in Madagascar?

The story of this Parsi family became more and more sad and moving in the letters. As mentioned, the solution is not made explicit in the other documents.²⁰ In conclusion, however, it is possible to make a hypothesis regarding a Zoroastrian community in Madagascar. The presence of the Parsis in Tamatave was certainly not as significant and numerous as that of other areas in the Indian Ocean. As seen, Koonverbai and daughter Nawazbai wrote of “*little or no intercourse with persons residing in Surat.*” However, this statement is not sufficient to exclude the presence of other Parsis on the island. Indeed, we need to underline and reflect on several points. We must consider the presence of a Parsi priest in Tamatave at least as early as the 1870s and then the arrival at the beginning of the following decade of Koonverbai's brother “*as the servant of some other persons.*”²¹ Then, we have to recall what Delphine Menant wrote about the presence of two other Parsis at the end of the nineteenth century, a few years after the facts presented here. Finally, another element to consider is also the Parsi community in Mauritius, a well-documented presence.²² Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee himself, as seen, had been there before arriving in Madagascar. On the basis of these elements, it is legitimate to think that these were not entirely occasional presences.

In this field, more research should be carried out. The work could also be outlined within the international political framework. Surely the political destiny of Madagascar helped to avoid more consistent Indian and Parsi settlements. In any case, a better understanding of the Zoroastrian presence in Madagascar can at the same time provide interesting new features for a more careful analysis of the migratory and trade movements of Parsis along the coasts of the Indian Ocean.

¹ A first concise and preliminary article on the results of this research was presented in Matteo Miele, “A Parsi Community in Madagascar? Research on British Archival Sources,” *CSEAS Newsletter*, no. 79 (2021): 012–013. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor R. Michael Feener, Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Kyoto University, for the discussions and advice on this work.

² Alan Williams, *The Zoroastrian Myth of Migration from Iran and Settlement in the Indian Diaspora. Text, Translation and Analysis of the 16th Century Qeṣṣe-ye Sanjān ‘The Story of Sanjan’* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2009), 7.

³ Delphine Menant, *Les parsis. Histoire des communautés zoroastriennes de l’Inde* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1898), 360–477; Amalendu Guha, “The Comprador Role of Parsi Seths, 1750-1850,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 5, no. 48 (28 November 1970): 1933–1936; Bakhtiar Dadabhoy, *Sugar in Milk. Lives of Eminent Parsis* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2008); Tirthankar Roy, *A Business History of India. Enterprise and the Emergence of Capitalism from 1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 44–47.

⁴ See for example: Dalia Ray, *The Parsees of Calcutta* (Kolkata: Sujana Publications, 2005).

⁵ Jamsheed K. Choksy, “Iranians and Indians on the shores of Serendib (Sri Lanka),” in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, eds. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London – New York: Routledge, 2008), 181–210.

⁶ *Report on the Administration of Burma during 1898-99* (Rangoon: printed by the Superintendent, Government Printing, Burma, 1899), Part III: Burma Statistical Returns, No. 7, I.D.–Population. Upper Burma, p. xiii; Suna Kanga and Subina Khaneja, *The Parsis of Singapore. History, Culture, Cuisine* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2017).

⁷ John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora. Religion and Migration* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 145–188.

⁸ Dosabhai Framji Karaka, *History of the Parsis. Including Their Manners, Customs, Religion, and Present Position*, vol. II (London: Macmillan and Co., 1884), 260–261.

⁹ Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 245–313.

¹⁰ John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams, eds., *Parsis in India and the Diaspora* (London – New York: Routledge, 2008).

¹¹ Rusheed R. Wadia, “Bombay Parsi Merchants in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, eds. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London – New York: Routledge, 2008), 123.

¹² The Parsi community of South Africa is less well known, but still not to be completely ignored and has to be mentioned in this brief introduction to the Zoroastrian communities of Africa in contemporary times. See T. Naidoo, *The Parsee Community in South Africa* (Durban: Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Durban-Westville, Occasional Paper No. 22, August 1987). The two most distinguished representatives of this community were Parsee Rustomjee and – more recently – Frene Ginwalla (John R. Hinnells, “Parsis in India and the diaspora in the twentieth century and beyond,” in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, eds. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London – New York: Routledge, 2008), 257). The community of Mauritius will be discussed later.

¹³ Menant, *Les parsis*, 404.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Koonverbai, Widow, and Nawazbai, Daughter, of the late Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee, to Mr. Peile, March 23, 1882, FO 403/28, Inclosure 3 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 55.

¹⁶ *The India List and India Office List for 1905* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1905), 585.

¹⁷ Koonverbai, Widow, and Nawazbai, Daughter, of the late Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee, to Mr. Peile, March 23, 1882, FO 403/28, Inclosure 3 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, pp. 55–56.

¹⁸ Koonverbai, Widow, and Dinbai, Daughter, of the late Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee, to Mr. Peile, April 15, 1882, FO 403/28, Inclosure 4 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 56; Cowasjee Byramjee to Mr. Gonne, September 15, 1882, FO 403/28, Inclosure 7 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, pp. 57–58; Mr. Gonne to Consul Pakenham, September 26, 1882, FO 403/28, Inclosure 8 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 58; Cowasjee Byramjee to Mr. Gonne, February 1, 1883, FO 403/28, Inclosure 9 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 58; Mr. Gonne to Consul Pakenham, February 9, 1883, FO 403/28, Inclosure 10 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 58; Cowasjee Byramjee to Mr. Gonne, April 24, 1883, FO 403/28, Inclosure 11 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 58; Mr. Gonne to Consul Pakenham, May 4, 1883, FO 403/28, Inclosure 10 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 59; Cowasjee Byramjee to Mr. Gonne, August 2, 1883, TNA, FO 403/28, Inclosure 2 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 54–55; The Governor of Bombay in Council to the Earl of Kimberley, August 27, 1883, FO 403/28, Inclosure 1 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 54; Mr. Godley to Mr. Lister, October 8, 1883, FO 403/28, No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 54.

¹⁹ Koonverbai, Widow, and Nawazbai, Daughter, of the late Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee, to Mr. Peile, March 23, 1882, FO 403/28, Inclosure 3 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 55.

²⁰ Suffice it to say that on August 27, 1883, Governor James Ferguson, E. W. Ravenscroft, and the aforementioned J. B. Peile wrote to the Earl of Kimberley “to place the matter before Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in view to such action being taken as Earl Granville may deem advisable,” The Governor of Bombay in Council to the Earl of Kimberley, August 27, 1883, FO 403/28, Inclosure 1 in No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 54. On October 8, this letter was forwarded to Earl Granville (Mr. Godley to Mr. Lister, October 8, 1883, FO 403/28, No. 64, The National Archives, London, Kew, p. 54).

²¹ It is not clear who these “other persons” were; it can be suggested that they were Parsis, but at the moment we have no decisive sources for such a claim.

²² By way of example, we can cite here the testimony of William Ellis in his *Three visits to Madagascar*. Ellis wrote: “*The aspect of these several localities indicates the widely different classes comprised in the population of Port Louis, and at the same time imparts an agreeable variety to the prospect. But it is chiefly on landing that a scene peculiarly novel and striking meets the eye of a stranger from Europe. On the custom-house quay all is activity and bustle, even in the hottest part of the day. Gangs of Coolies are toiling, and sing in a low monotonous tone, as they empty the barges or lighters that lie along the edge of the wharf, and deposit their contents under large sheds on the shore. Weighers are busy at the public scales; clerks, and custom-house officers, and merchants or traders of India or Europe, Arabs, Parsees, English, French, Mauritian and Chinese, all in their distinctive costumes, may be met with there, some with the high-crowned hat and stiff angular dress of the European, others in the loose flowing white robe and turban of India or Arabia,—most of the former, and some of the latter, seeking protection from the fierce rays of the sun under large umbrellas. [...] There are upwards of 10,000 Indians in Port Louis, and an equal number of ex-apprentices. In 1851, the whole population of Port Louis was about 50,000, but it has probably much increased since that time. The same activity characterises the business parts of the town during the early part of the day; and the inhabitants here also present an equal diversity of costume and character. Arab, Parsee, Bengalee or Chinese merchants, or traders from Muscat or Bombay, Tranquebar, Pondichery, Madras, or Calcutta, Singapore or Canton; with English and French merchants and sailors; English military; the local police, the latter wearing the same uniform as that of London, excepting that the tops of their hats are covered with white canvas instead of glazed oilskin,*” William Ellis, *Three Visits to Madagascar during the Years 1853–1854–1856. Including a Journey to the Capital. With Notices of the Natural History of the Country and of the Present Civilisation of the People* (London: John Murray, 1858), 53.