

**The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project**  
An Oral History with Hassan Hirji

Archives and Research Collections  
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Narrator: Hassan Hirji  
Researcher: Shezan Muhammedi  
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**Abstract:**

Mr. Hirji was born and raised in Mpigi, Uganda after his father had migrated from India in the early 1930s. They were encouraged to migrate to East Africa based on the guidance of the spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslim community at the time, Aga Khan III Sultan Mohammad Shah.

The Hirji family opened up a small store which flourished in the rural town of Uganda which enabled them to purchase other stores and continue to prosper. Education remained a top priority within the family and Mr. Hirji graduated with a teaching degree and began working in the Kabaka school. After President Amin issued the expulsion decree the Hirji family was rendered stateless due to their Ugandan citizenship. With his education and work experience, Hassan was able to migrate to Canada along with his parents as Ugandan Asian refugees.

They were resettled in Brockville and eventually reunited with their entire family over the following years. Hassan and his parents eventually moved to Toronto where they have continued to work and volunteer within and outside of the Ismaili Muslim community. As an accountant and systems manager for over 20 years continues to do community work while traveling around the world and spending time with his family.

This interview was conducted at a local Tim Hortons in the Don Mills area of Toronto, Ontario.

Hassan Hirji: "Ok I will start with my background. My father's story here is because it is very inspiring and uh, this was um, he came to Uganda from India not on his own free will. This was the guidance by Sultan Muhammad Shah [Aga Khan III], the grandfather of the present Imam [Aga Khan IV]. You are Ismaili yes?"

**Shezan Muhammedi: "Yeah, I am"**

[Laughter]

Hassan: "So let me continue, so when I use some of these words you will know what I mean, haha. So, I don't have to do further explanation then. So, basically then what happened was, this is going back to the 1930s. In the 1930s, my dad used to um, he finished his high school education. So, at that time he had his, and at that time he was considered as learned person. And my father's parents and my father's grandfather they were in a small town in Gujarat called Sanosara and they had small farms there. Not only just small farms, many many mini farms. Since he had gone to high school he wanted to go to the city in Bombay and work there. SO because of his involvement with the community in the smaller town he was able to make connections. He was working for Bombay Council [the Ismaili Council in Bombay] and his work involved what you call here, Bait-ul-Ilm, over there it was religious education. So he was put in charge of managing some of those small religious education schools they were running in Bombay and outside Bombay. So, he was doing a great job so then came the deedar [spiritual visitation of the leader of the Ismaili community] of Sultan Mohammad Shah in 1930 and what happened was before Sultan Muhammad Shah came, let me just go one step from before. He had a friend and he visited Africa. And so, he said why don't you come, I'm going to Africa and you check it out because a lot of people are moving to Africa for opportunities and all that.

So in 1930s my dad came by sea and it used to take about two weeks or something to come to Uganda or maybe even longer because you had to take the train and all that. So he came and of course at that time Uganda was totally a like, it was like you don't see roads there, you see minor/small dirt roads and stuff like that. And people were struggling and at that time there was a lot of mosquitoes and all that stuff in Africa. So, he really got discouraged saying that I

don't think this is for me. And ofcourse I cannot blame him because he was working for an institution in Bombay Council with a desk and a chair and then mind you he was going around on bicycles to other small small schools to visit and give them training of administrations and all that. He said, 'I don't think I need to come to Uganda. I have a great job in the council. I am getting paid well. My father's got farms there. My brothers are all working on the farms and we have a nice living there'. So, he said, 'I don't think I want to come to Africa'. So, he went back and continued, went back to India again. He stayed there for about a month or two months or something and he decided to go back. And he made up his mind that this is not my cup of tea"

Laughter

Hassan: "So he told my mom and at that time my mom had just delivered a daughter so she was small and there was another one on her way. By the way, our family we are 8 sisters and I'm the only brother"

Laughter

**Shezan: "Oh wow, you are the only brother"**

Hassan: "So one daughter was born, another one on her way and all that stuff was going on. So, he said, 'You know what I don't think I want to go to Africa'. So, in 1930 in Bombay, Sultan Muhammad Shah visited and gave deedar and there was a darbar [celebration held on the special occasion of the spiritual leader's visit]. There were thousands of people, there was a big jamat [community of Ismaili Muslims] at that time too. Even now, but at that time there was a big jamat coming from all over for deedar. So, he was sitting with his family and Sultan Muhammad Shah gave a firman and he asked, 'how many of you have gone to Africa?' So, people raised their hands and said 'we've been to Africa,' and my father was one of them. So, he said, 'I want you to come closer to the stage'. So, they all went close to the stage and Sultan Muhammad Shah was asking each one of them, there was a handful of them, and he asked, 'where did you go?' One went to Zanzibar and then when he came to my dad, he asked, 'where did you go?' My dad said, 'I went to Uganda'. 'I want you to go back'. So, when the Imam says I want you to go back to Uganda, you just pack up and leave"

**Shezan: "Yeah"**

Laughter

Hassan: "So he says, ok, and comes back to the council and tells the presidentsaheb [the president of the Ismaili council] that the Imam has sent for me to go back to Uganda. But he says, 'you know my experience in Uganda was so bad but I really don't want to go. So now what am I supposed to do?' He said, 'you know what you're doing a good job, we'll ask him because he's still in town and we'll ask him if it's ok if you stay.' Because at that time when they say firman they take it very seriously. Even know we all take it seriously. So, the institution's leadership went to Sultan Muhammad Shah saying, his name was Muhammad Ali Hirji, saying, 'you asked Muhammad bhai to go to Uganda but he's doing a great job here. He's looking after all these BUI schools and he's doing a great job. We would rather him stay here'. 'Leave him alone, let him go'. This is what Sultan Muhammad Shah says to the leadership. He says, 'I want you to let him go'. So the institutional leaders came back and said, 'you have to go. Sultan Muhammad Shah has said not to stop you and he wants that you should go'.

Ok so he resigned from his job and he tells my mom, you know bapa [another term referring to the spiritual leader of the Ismaili community] says that I should go back at the next opportunity'. So after a few months he comes back to Uganda and again he goes back to that family that he knew from the other side. And he said, 'you know what Sultan Muhammad Shah says I should come back here. I want to settle down here. Please help me cause I don't have any money. And I don't know any languages because Africa had a different language'. At that time, everybody was helping everybody out so they said, 'no problem, you come and work'. So, he started working in one of those relatives store, or shop, and he learned the language and he learned how to do the training. Because he had never done the training before, buy and sell because he was just a professional teacher, I mean an administrator. So, he learned all that and he started his own shop. And then he called my mom and at that time, there were two daughters that he had and all three of them came to Uganda and settled down in that small

little town in the north. But after a few years he was not able to live there for too long because that climate was too dry. The weather was too dry"

**Shezan: "Do you remember the name of the town?"**

Hassan: "It was uh, very close to uh, a town called Soroti but it was not in Soroti. It was called Muria, totally outside, a very small small town because if you want to do a business then you need more, you need some capital but in the smaller town people were able to help you out. And then you purchase from a bigger city, on credit some goods to sell. At that time, everybody was helping everybody out basically. But then he moved down south in the district of Buganda. And then he moved to a town called Mpigi, near Masaka. That small town is where the rest of the siblings were born. He was there for almost twenty-five years. I was born in Mpigi so the reason I'm mentioning about the Imam gives you that blessings to go somewhere, those blessings follow you.

So he went into the small town called Mpigi and we flourished. In twenty-five years, we flourished like you wouldn't believe. From a small store, it grew, we had a store as big as this Tim Hortons, and not just one but two stores just like this. My mom was running one store and my dad was running the other and we were all helping him out. All the siblings were helping them out in the store and bought a brand-new car. So, over the years, and at the same time he was a strong believer in education because he was in education. So, he gave as much opportunity for us to go to school there. Then we moved to Kampala to go to high school and then we went to colleges and universities as well. So, those of my older siblings were not able to capture this education because they were still in the process of settling down but the rest of us were able to get good education and were able to get good jobs in the city.

In my case, I was, I went to teacher training college and graduated as a teacher and I was teaching in one of these government schools in Uganda. After I graduated, I don't know if you know, in Uganda before independence there was kingdom in Uganda there was a kingdom. The king of the kingdom was known as the Kabaka. So the Kabaka had a big palace with a huge

cemented fence, a very high fence. So after I graduated I got a job in that palace. So I was teaching in what was called the Kabaka school, it was called as Lubiri secondary school. So I was teaching there and uh Uganda just had independence in 1962 and I was teaching there in 1969, in the early 1970s. So the local government in power was against this kingdom. So because they did not want this kingdom to have anything to do with the political parties they wanted to remove the Kabaka from power. So there was a revolution and there was quite a bit of, unfortunately, there was a bombing that happened right in the palace and the school was destroyed. So then temporarily the school was moved to another area and Americans, I believe, or the British, those two governments combined together, they built a brand new school and then we were all transferred into this school. They gave us residence there and you should have seen, I used to teach physics and chemistry. You should've seen my laboratory. I used to have a lab assistant for physics and lab assistants for chemistry. I used to teach grade eleven and grade twelve. I taught there for less than two years and then we had to leave for Canada.

So what happened was while we were still teaching there at the same time I was also helping him in his store. So what happened was that eventually when all the siblings grew up, we were all getting jobs and education in the city of Kampala. So my father had no choice but to close down the Stores in Mpigi and move to Kampala and then we were all living in Kampala. The siblings grew up and they all got married and had kids and stuff too. So what happened was I was still helping my dad in the store and also teaching at the same time. So in 1972 when this Idi Amin, you know, came saying that you know, he want all the Ugandan Asians to leave even though we were all holding Ugandan passports. So immediately we became stateless. So this was the worry that now, where can we go? So they were saying that if you are of Indian origin than India has to take you. Then India came back and said, 'no we cannot take these Indians back because they are holding British passports'. So now Britain has to take them because the original passports they were holding were British passports. Because when my dad came from India he came under the British passport because India was not independent in the 1930s. So they didn't have an Indian passport but those who came with an Indian passport letter, they were saying that you guys have to go back to India. So there was a lot of these political

discussions going on between different governments and finally at that time Hazar Imam [spiritual leader of the Ismaili community] had already negotiated with Canada to take a certain number of Ismailis and also they decided that they will also take about 6,000 or something into Canada.

So I went and I said, 'you know what I don't want to waste any time. This guy is crazy, let's just make a move'. My dad was totally reluctant to leave Uganda. I said, 'look, I know you are reluctant to move out and so am I, but we need to start the process of moving'. Because the only source of contact we had was when you go to jamat khane [place of religious and social gathering for Ismailis] in Kampala this is where you will find out what is going on. Because different people are bringing different pieces of information and this is where it was more organized for the community to find out what decision to make for the family. Because it was a big decision. So as soon as the newspaper, the Uganda Argus, stated that Canada was willing to accept immigrants and you can go there and set up a small temporary immigration office in Kampala and start applying there. There was also an announcement in khane [ismaili prayer hall] that you should start applying. There was the USA, New Zealand governments and immigration teams that came as well. So I went to the Canadian Embassy and that was the first one to open up and I went and put my application in. So at that time it was me and my parents. So you put down what you do and all that stuff. Within two to three weeks I got a reply from the Canadian immigration that you are qualified to move to Canada. I was put on the third flight, I was one of the most privileged persons to be put on the list. I was in the first ones out of 600 or 700 people to qualify because I was working for Government School and I had a good education. My parents were the only dependents on me and at that time I was young, I was in my twenties at that time so I was easily accepted."

So I came here and then in the newspaper my name came. You are qualified and come in for the second interview. So I went there and they said ok, here's your temporary one-way visa to Canada for me, my dad, and my mom. So I went home and I told my dad, 'let's pack up we need to leave'. We can't leave though, since we had stores and everything to dispose I mean



everything. So I went back to the immigration and I said, 'you know what, we need still more time'. They said, 'ok, I'm going to put you on the second flight to Canada'. So he gave me another three weeks. So within three weeks, we basically just left everything, you know, because the only thing was that before you leave there was a rule that you need to have clearance for immigration, that's the only way you can board the plane. So I go through all that and basically our house, our furniture, bank accounts, everything, you just go and hand over to the government and they give you clearance. They give the keys to the shop, I gave my bank accounts, the property we just gave it to them.

So we were here in October 1972. I was one of the first ones to arrive in Canada because we arrived in Montreal. So as soon as we arrived they put us into these temporary army barracks in good accommodations. Mind you, you don't expect a five star hotel or something. We were fortunate that we were able to get, that as soon as we were. I always say that it was due to the involvement of Hazar Imam [The Aga Khan] and the Canadian government. There were these planes, and I had never seen refugees picked up by planes. Planes after planes, Air Canada planes came to Entebbe airport and we were basically, you know, boarded the plane. I mean a lot of people had some challenges. We did not have any challenges because we were just following the rules. A lot of people were doing different things and they were going to some uncomfortable moments, you know. People were taking things that they were not supposed to take. We did not do any of those things, our transitions were as smooth as you can think.

We arrived in Montreal and settled into the barracks. The next day they gave us, it was snowing at that time, you know in the '70s it used to start snowing in October, not like this"

Laughter

"Not like these changes in the weather. So they gave us the warm clothes and warm boots. You know there was so much food they gave us. I'd never seen in my life the food they had displayed there. The fruits, sandwiches, hot dishes and everything. I was just flabbergasted with

the treatment that they gave us. Absolutely, very very much appreciated it. And the very next day they told us, we had to go to these stations where you register, and they say where you want to go and where they would let you go. So at that time the only two places I knew in Canada were Toronto and Vancouver. So they asked, 'where do you want to go?' I said, 'Toronto'. They said, 'you know what, you want to settle, so we're going to send you to a small town. So they sent me to Brockville Ontario. So I was there for almost two and a half years or three years.'

**Shezan: "With your parents?"**

Hassan: "Yeah, with my parents. And then, you won't believe it, within one week. So as soon as we arrived in Brockville by train from Montreal, at that time immigration officers in Brockville came to receive us at the train station, they accommodated us in a hotel in Brockville. And within one week, they accommodated us into a nice two bedroom apartment in Brockville. And our picture was in the newspaper that these Ugandan families have come and we need to help and support them. You should have seen, that at that time Christmas was approaching, and our kitchen was full of food. Boxes and boxes of tins and stuff, milk and bread, and we literally had to say that don't bring any more, we don't have any places to put it. People were so generous. And there was doctor in town who phoned me up as soon as he read the paper and said, 'why don't you come for dinner to my place?' And he became one of my very good friends. He was an eye doctor and he was doing a lot of voluntary work. Every year he used to take time off and go to the Caribbean Islands and he used to do free eye checkups and services for the islands. So we became very good friends and he was also a very good friend of a pharmaceutical company called Park Davis. Park Davis is one of those companies that sold all sorts of capsules and Benylin and all sorts of those cough mixtures and all that. There was a big manufacturing in Brockville.

So the very next week I was working. I was working, they gave me an aptitude test which I passed, so I started working. Because of my very good chemistry knowledge, I was able to start working with a chemist in helping out in making different mixtures and antibiotics. He would

give me all these different measurements and all that. Mind you, you have to prepare it in large quantities because it goes into the machines and every few hours they keep on changing. And you know what, it was such a great experience to work in such an industry, where I got so much knowledge and so much exposure to intellectual peoples. And I bought my first car."

Laughter

"With in a month, two months or something. This guy was giving me a ride in the beginning but within the first two or three months, I bought a car. I went for driving lessons and then my parents were becoming very lonely in that small town because we were really not used to living by ourselves and there was no community around and there was no jamat khane around. So finally, my sister was living in Collingwood and we found out where all the different different families were living and finally we moved to Toronto. So what I used to do in Brockville was, I used to work in that Park Davis but at the same time in the evening and on Saturdays too, I used to go to night schools. I did my accounting and economics diploma.

So when I came to Toronto, I ended up in one of the accounting departments. So I was doing an accounting. And then of course, I visited Montreal again because my niece was settled in Montreal because she came from Zaire, so she knew lot of French. So she settled there. We went to visit her and this is where I met my wife, in Montreal. She was working for Bell Canada and then she transferred to Toronto Bell Canada and then we got married here [Toronto] and married since then and living in the same house since then"

Laughter

"And then what I did was, I went and upgraded myself once I got married, and once we were a little more settled and went and did some upgrading in computer skills and all that stuff. With the help of my computer skills and my accounting skills, I was able to land into a position where I was able to manage a system. So that's what I'm doing still now, I've been working with the same company for the past thirty years."

Laughter

"And my wife worked for Bell Canada for thirty three years. So shukar [thanks to God] we had challenges in the process but we were one of the very fortunate families that had a little bit of education which went a long way. It really came a long way and of course then with my good income and everything, we were able to do a lot of community work as well. So I was involved for many years, and I was looking after what my dad as well, I was looking after the BUI [Ismaili religious education classes]. So I was a principal there at the BUI centre at headquarters and I became a sector member as well as a member on the Tariqah Board [a voluntary institution within the Ismaili community]. And then my involvement at that time also was at the same time with Aga Khan Foundation so I managed a lot of jamati work for the Aga Khan foundation. And um, I continued to progress and then, currently, I'm the Aga Khan Foundations national vice convenor. So I look after GTA, south west Ontario, Ottawa, Montreal, and Quebec. So they have regional conveners there, so I basically look after them and provide information that gets passed down from the foundation so I pass it down to them and we have meetings there. And so right now we have annual meetings in Ottawa at the DII [Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat located in Ottawa]. So we have one on November 5 and 6. So that's what I have been doing. A lot of voluntary work and we also got appointed to do a lot of jamati appointments as well at headquarters jamat khane. So we were very very fortunate and blessed that we were able to achieve quite a bit here in Canada.

Yes we had challenged like many other families that would arrived from anywhere else and settling down. But there were a few things that we always kept in the back of our minds, which was trying to do things for the community and for the country. And do everything ethically. You must keep the ethics in everything. Whether at work or within the community and everything. This is where I think we can pass our message to outside the community and have a good education. Our Imam is telling us to live in a way that is true with the values of Islam and make sure you never lose those values. You always hold those values and always demonstrate it and

that would be my message to the future generations. Keep on to those values but you need to practice them and I have gotten so many praises from outside, they they have never seen such a great human being. Complimenting that they see a good human being they see someone with good values and good human behaviour. And that would really be my closing statements, that make sure you stand to the good values and if you are Muslim or Ismailis hold on to those values because that is very very important.

And number two, because you are coming from a minority, small, community you do one small little mistake it not only hurts you it hurts the whole community. So it's very very important that we hold on to these values and follow the laws of this country. Be a good person at all times.

Hassan: "So that would be my closing remarks."

**Shezan: "And then so when the expulsion order first came out. What happened to all your siblings? Where did they all end up?"**

Hassan: "So what happened was that because most of them, well all of my siblings were married except for my youngest sister, she was in England. So we had to sponsor her and bring her here [Canada] and she got married but all the rest of my siblings were all married. And I think two or three were able to come to Canada directly but they were not able to come very quickly like me, they had to wait a little longer because they had some dependents like children and all that. They were not able to get out easily but they did and they were settled in Winnipeg"

**Shezan: "In Winnipeg, ok, interesting."**

Hassan: "So two of my sisters were in Winnipeg and one of my sister's husband's cousin was in Yellowknife they ended up in Yellowknife. So most of my siblings were able to come to Canada. And one of my younger sisters who was in England and once we settled down here in Brockville, I sponsored her and then she came to Canada as well."

**Shezan: "And then, so where are they now?"**

Hassan: "My younger sister lives in Collingwood and she's a hairdresser by profession and her husband is a chartered account and they love small town Collingwood. They made so many friends. Interesting about my younger sister, is that she was so involved in the community and made a lot of friends because of her profession as a hair dresser and she had three children, one son and two daughters. And again, taking the advice from the parents and from the Imam of the time, good education. So she spent good time with her kids and her son was sent to MIT and he graduated as a software engineer and he's working, right now he's working in San Francisco. And her other daughter she went to one of the US universities and she's a doctor and she's also working in San Francisco. And the youngest went to Harvard and she's graduating, she went for a second degree now, and I think she's graduating soon and she's also moving to San Francisco. So my sister is in San Francisco right now. She's coming back next week. Two of them are married now and they've got kids and all that.

And another sister settled in Winnipeg and she had five children, three daughters and two sons, they all moved down to Calgary. And once they got some education, the son-in-law was working for a small Toyota dealership as you know, as service manager. So after a few years, at that time, outside Calgary in a smaller town an opportunity came for a dealership. So he with the help of the parents, and he was able to accumulate some capital and he was able to buy this dealership. Now this dealership was really dead, like it was going bankrupt.

Laughter

But they really brought it up and it became one of the best number of car selling dealerships in the province of Alberta, they were number one after I think four or five years. So then the opportunity came for a bigger dealership in Calgary and because they did so well the Honda, sorry, it was Honda. The Honda dealership was able to qualify them for buying. So even if you have the capital you need to qualify in order to purchase the dealership. So now they own TNT Honda in Calgary and they bought another dealership called Toyota in Calgary and they've expanded to Country Hill Toyota. So they've got four-five dealerships now. Toronto, Edmonton,

and Calgary, again they are helping our community. Every World Partnership Walk they donate one car in Calgary. So they've done really well, can't complain really"

**Shezan: "And then um, I guess when you guys settled in Brockville, did your parents start working?"**

Hassan: "My parents was, when we left, my dad had just turned sixty five so he wanted to work but at that time he was having challenges with his knees and all that. And we thought that putting him to work, you really need to work hard, it was not going to be a sit down job because he would not qualify for a sit down job. He didn't have any higher education, he just had business experience. So we decided that no he shouldn't work. So we decided that we would try to manage somehow. So my mom and dad did not work after coming to Canada."

**Shezan: "And then they came with you from Brockville to Toronto."**

Hassan: "Yes, they were always with me. My father was, passed away when he was ninety-three so he was always with us. Mom passed away a little bit young, sooner. He had a very good, long life.

**Shezan: "And then so, you kind of talked about it a little bit before when you guys arrived in Brockville, that you made really good friends with that doctor. So how were your interactions with Canadians when you first came?"**

Hassan: "I was very fortunate that I had graduated from a college, a teacher training college and English was my first language. Like I could speak other languages at home but I was always teaching in English. So my command was pretty good, now it's much better, but of course at that time I was able to speak quite comfortably so people were very impressed that you have a good English command at that time so they were really getting impressed. They did not have any knowledge of what people from Uganda looked like

Laughter

"How do they interact with you? So for them it was a very novel thing. Even for us it was a novel thing as well of interacting with them but they just wanted to hear our stories. And they just wanted to listen to stories and loved talking to us. So we were getting invitations for dinner from so many families in Brockville and we would just tell them the same story over and over again, that you know, we are so appreciative of the Canadian government that we were able to come so comfortably. In a plane and without any challenges. I know people had different different challenges but I was able to land a job so quickly. Can you imagine from Uganda, I left October something, the third week of October and middle of November, I'm already working. You know, it was quite a drastic change but because I think we left that mindset that you know we have to settle down here again and maybe we might go back. You know, that was another thing was going back in that back of our minds, that this is a temporary thing, maybe we'll go back because all of our assets were still sitting there because we just handed it over to the government but it was still sitting there. So we always had that hope that we would go back but over time we realized that we should just forget those things.

It was like a dream. We had a very good life there in Uganda. As far as me growing up because we were the second generation in Uganda and my father had already established himself in Uganda so when we were born we were given a lot of material things like good clothing. We had nice cars driving us around, we had a driver, we had people working in the house. So we'd sit down for lunch and dinner and somebody is serving you, pick up your plate, bring it down, so those comforts are gone when you come here which we realized and that was a tough part when we were settling down here. All the comfort like I remember going to high school in Uganda and you get up in the morning and we had people working in our house, they would iron your shirt and shorts and polish your shoes and all that stuff so those comforts you of course you miss them. But I always say, you know what, we experienced that lifestyle and most people don't even have that opportunity of experiencing. We had that beautiful weather in a small town where we were living. There were lots of great tropical fruits, mangoes, guava, and papaya, and bananas. You name it, it was in abundance. Like we had just trees growing right in our backyard basically.



So you miss that kind of a lifestyle at time, you know. It will always in your memory and coming to Canada after working hard and being committed to what you are doing we were able to, me and my wife, we were able to travel quite a bit from Canada. We've seen India, and I don't think we would have had the opportunity to go and see India if you were in Africa because of the income level. You were comfortable but I don't think you would have that excess income to travel to that extent. We went to South Africa. We've travel to most of Europe. We've traveled most of the US now. We always take vacation, two or three times a year. We've been on so many cruises in the Caribbean and international trips. I've been to Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, China, all those places we've been to right. So I just say shukar [thanks] that we had this opportunity to come here, work hard, and see the world as well."

**Shezan: "I guess sort of my last question is now after everything that you've been through, how would you identify yourself? Would you say you are a Ugandan Canadian, Ismaili Canadian, South Asian Canadian? No wrong answer."**

Hassan: "You know I always feel that I am an Ismaili. I guess it is because of the way that I have been brought up and how I have always been very close, close with the Imam of the time. With his guidance and all his firmans [religious advice from the Imam] that he's making I always felt that I am an Ismaili, always will be an Ismaili. Sometimes when someone says, 'Are you a Muslim?' I say, 'no I am not a Muslim. I am Ismaili'. Now realizing that I am an Ismaili Muslim. It is only recently that we have started identifying ourselves as Ismaili Muslims. Back home and even in the early times here, somebody asks you, 'Who are you?' 'I'm an Ismaili'. So that was my first thing that would come out of my mouth. So I would always identify myself as an Ismaili Canadian. Yes we are all have Canadian passports and we have all the Canadian rights but you always find that in the second or third generations will always feel as a true Canadian. I think we are always going to have the little piece of back home attached with us because this is where you are born and this is where you spent your early life, so that's always going to be attached with you

Laughter

So yes you are Canadian but at the same time we are Ugandan Ismaili Canadians, right?"

Laughter

**Shezan: "And then how was winter, your first experiences?"**

Hassan: "Winter has always been a challenge for all of us. It has been a real challenge and it continues because that's the weather pattern in Canada. We are blessed with a lot of things, a lot of material wealth and that stuff but weather is one of the areas we just have to cope with. There's no other way of escaping. You just have to face it and you know make the most of it. Take winter vacations

Laughter

So shukar [thanks to God] me and my wife after years of working, we take winter breaks. So it gives you a little bit of a winter break. Now, you know, family has got winter homes. They've got homes in Florida so we go to Florida homes."

**Shezan: "And then that first snowfall what was that like?"**

Hassan: "Well that was really quite an experience. You've never seen snow before and we would just go and stand outside like it was, you know, just touch it. It was amazing you know. An amazing experience but once it became really really cold it became a real challenge because you have to spend most of your time indoors. And at that time your income level is such that you can't go and participate in some of the winter sports because they are expensive. My youngest sister she was fortunate and it was her husband's good income as a chartered accountant that they were able to introduce their kids to winter sports. So when they were in Collingwood they used to do downhill skis, cross country skis, uh, they used to go play bowling and all sorts of activities they were able to do. But we as a first generation we were not able to do as the second generations are more fully integrated or fully participating in some of the

winter activities. So but then we were always involved with the families and the community as well. So that kept us going.

If you would say, 'how did you remain sane? How did you not go insane?' I think being with the community and being close with the community. Do community work, that's also very important. That would also be my advice to whoever is reading this article. Do community work because one, it gives you happiness. Community work is one thing that will give you happiness and no other thing will give you more happiness than doing community work. I used to get up early in the mornings on Saturdays, going to BUI centres [Ismaili Muslim religious education centres] and go and spend half a day there but I never thought that I'm wasting my day. I always came home full of joy, full of interactions with different people at the centre. Having lots of laughs together and I met so many friends through that community. I don't think I would have made that many friends or got to know them if I didn't do this community work. So through that I was able to mingle with all sorts of people from different walks of life and we are friends up until now. That's the one thing I would recommend.

Also if you get the chance to work outside the community that even better. There are tons of opportunities to do work outside of the community and I think by doing all this great job within the community, you know of our Ismaili volunteer corps, they get called up on outside to do work all the time. Now how were they able to do that? After years and years of good practice and commitment and discipline you know, that makes you get invited to outside venues. So look at in Calgary right now they have the stampede breakfast."

**Shezan: "Yeah the stampede breakfast every year"**

Hassan: "Yeah for so long and I was just reading, because I'm also subscribing to Ismaili mail so I was just reading just yesterday that they had an Ismaili walk in Vancouver. So there was an Ismaili walk in Vancouver and they raised 320,000 dollars for the fund raiser. So this is the great thing you can do not only within the community but also outside. And also I think that if you are an Ismaili you need to support Hazar Imam's [the Aga Khan's] institutions all around the world.

That would be another advice to the community at large. And do your utmost to support Hazar Imam's [the Aga Khan's] institutions. The Imam is doing so much work for the jamat (the entire Ismaili community) and it is the jamat's duty to support in every way you can. So um that would be my, one of my, you know statements. Support as much as you can. If you are in Toronto or in Canada support the Aga Khan museum.

I think every Ismaili must support the Aga Khan museum. Even if you are not using the membership take the membership. That would be one of my statements here. If have a museum, a museum that is going to be exposed to the rest of Canada and to the world and you want this museum to stay here and progress so we need to support that museum. So make sure get that membership and it is not very expensive. I mean, if you are an Ismaili you must take the membership. Whether you use it once a year or you don't use the membership, take the membership and support the museum. I became a member right from the day one.

Hassan: "As soon as the website opened I was one of the first to click on it and I've been supporting it ever since. Until I think I'm no longer able to I will support the Museum or any of the institutions because the Imam has done so much for the jamat and has done so much outside of the jamat and the credit he's giving, he's giving it to us. Who are you, I am the Imam of the Ismaili community. So when you go outside and you say who are you, I'm an Ismaili right away they relate you to the Imam. So that would be another statement here. Support, volunteer, good education, and be ethical to the values of Islam. That would be my bottom line here in summary. Just don't sit around, do something. Do something for the community, do something for the country too, we've got a lot of Ismailis who serve as members of parliament and have done a lot of work in the parliament as well. Look at, we just had two weeks ago, three weeks ago, we saw the Imam win the global citizenship award. Now only through good work and also with the support of the jamat he's able to achieve all that.

And I say also those who can go and visit AKDN institutions outside in other parts of the world. And you'll be surprised by the quality of that institution. I was in Karachi visiting a hospital. You

walk in through the gates, when they open the gates, and you are in a different world. Have you been there?"

**Shezan: "No I haven't, I've seen photos"**

Hassan: "You go to Mombasa academy, you go to either of our academies, you go to Aga Khan hospital Nairobi, Aga Khan hospital in Dar-es-salaam. You go to some of these jamat khanas in Bombay and all those beautiful jamat khanas, there's so much. There are beautiful jamat khanas all over East Africa. They have a website and you can go and visit all of them. The thing is that when our Ismaili jamat came and settled in Africa, what was the first thing they did? They built jamat khanas. If you look at some of the pictures of jamat khanas in Nairobi, in Dar-es-salaam, in Dodoma, and in every little town. I'll give you a story of when we were in Mpigi.

So my dad was mukhi (male officiant or minister in the Ismaili mosque) for twenty-two years. Mpigi was a small little town and um it was mainly, the businesses were based on harvest so on different seasons. So we used to have a cotton season, there was a lot of cotton and another was coffee and a lot of other fruit and vegetable seasons coming during different months of the year but coffee was one of the biggest in that area. So people would go and sell and they get income out of it and they would come and spend on or at our store. They would come and buy clothing or whatever.

So the first thing when my dad came to Mpigi with the help of other members of the jamat in that town, there was only about four or five around at that time. And they went around and collected funds from families that they knew and basically begging them that we want to build a jamat khane in Mpigi. That was in the 1940s, or the early '50s kind of thing. They built a small jamat khane and it was still there when we left. It was still the same jamat khane and it went through little renovations here and there with a nice little garden.

So those are some of the very interesting stories you know and memories of the past. You cherish them.

**Shezan: "Is there anything you wanted to add?"**

Hassan: "No I think we pretty well covered a lot of things here"

**Shezan: "Thank you so much for your time"**

Hassan: "Thank you for coming and listening to me you know"

**Shezan: "I loved it, every second of it. It was incredible."**