

Salwa Yousuf Al-Moayyed

The Will to Succeed



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Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter One: Roots

Chapter Two: Beginnings

Chapter Three: Choices

Chapter Four: Expansion

Chapter Five: Determination

Chapter Six: Progress

Chapter Seven: The Fire

Chapter Eight: The Company

Chapter Nine: My Country

Chapter One

ROOTS

After many years of severe drought in which the desert oases withered and the wells dried up, our Arab forefathers were unable to continue living in Najd in the Arabian peninsula and were forced by famine to leave in search of a better life in another land. Their decision to emigrate was a painful and difficult one; they were leaving the land of their fathers and grandfathers for a foreign country about which they knew nothing. But they were a trading people with an innate love of adventure and no fear of the unknown. So, they set out and after a long and arduous journey they reached the region of Dashtia on the Persian shore of the Arabian Gulf. Here they settled and chose our ancestor Abdulla to be responsible for the tribe's affairs. He was nicknamed "Abdulla the Chief" and when, after a number of years, he decided to marry, it seemed entirely natural that he should take as his bride a girl from the locally prominent Qawasimi tribe. Life with his wife and three sons was pleasant and agreeable enough but Abdulla's heart was heavy with nostalgia for his Arab homeland and he lived in the hope that he and his children would one day settle in another Arab country. So, when our grandfathers were subsequently impelled by circumstances to move to Bahrain and settle there, it was as if God Almighty wished to fulfil our ancestor's cherished dream.

After Abdulla's death in 1465 at the age of 80 years, no further details of our forebears' history are recorded until our ancestor Hassan settled in the Persian city of Dasful. At this time Shaikh Jabbara Al-Nasri held sway over most of the states on the eastern littoral of the Arabian Gulf, including Bahrain which he conquered and controlled for more than 30 years before the advent of Al Khalifa rule. Shaikh Jabbara was partial to the Hawalla Arabs, among them certain members of our tribe, establishing contacts with them in Dasful and honouring them when they visited Bahrain. Thus when he suggested to our ancestors that they should move to Bahrain, it seemed like a golden opportunity to realise their

dream -and that of their forefathers- to return to an Arab country that reminded them of their homeland of Najd, from which they had been driven by famine. However, fate did not allow them to fulfil their dream; Shaikh Al-Nasri was deposed by Sultan Nader Shah while on pilgrimage to Mecca and the hoped-for move did not materialise.

After another period of unrecorded history, we learn of our ancestor Abdulla ibn Hassan who emigrated to Kashkanar, seeking the protection of the region's ruler, Shaikh Abdulla Al-Harmi. The latter not only extended his protection but agreed that Abdulla should marry his sister who belonged to the locally prominent Madajia tribe. She bore him a son named Hassan who grew up under the influence of his maternal uncles of the Madajia tribe, renowned for its goodness and charitable works. Because of his pride in his mother's tribe, Hassan married his maternal cousin Almanah Nabash, who bore him two sons — Ibrahim Hassan Abdulla (subsequently known as "Ibrahim the First" due to the great number of Ibrahims in the family) and Yousuf Hassan Abdulla, known as "Yousuf Al-Shatar" because his great height and powerful physique suggested a camel. Ibrahim was born in 1805, two years before his brother Yousuf. He chose to spend the whole of his life in Kashkanar and married his uncle's cousin who lived in Dashtia. He had three daughters, among whom were Amina and Fatima, who subsequently became the mother of Shaikh Mubarak, who visited Bahrain and was received by the Ruler Shaikh Isa bin Ali in his palace for three days in return for the hospitality Shaikh Isa had received when he visited Persia during the Eid. Ahmed bin Ibrahim was born in Kashkanar on 13 April 1822 and, after emigrating to Bahrain, died there on 26 June 1896. He was greatly loved by the ruler of Kashkanar, Muhammed Al-Harmi as well as by the Al-Harmi and Madhkur families on account of his moral rectitude, his pride in himself and his courage. So, when circumstances forced him to leave for Bahrain he did not tell Shaikh Muhammed Al-Harmi of the date of his departure, travelling under cover of darkness to the country that was later to become his home and that of his children and grandchildren. His uncle Yousuf Al-Shatar had already moved to Bahrain before him from Al-Zubara where he had settled for a time after leaving Kashkanar and where he had formed a firm friendship with Shaikh Abdulla ibn Ahmed Al-Fatih. Yousuf's move to Bahrain coincided with the coming to power there of the victorious Shaikh Ahmed Al-Fatih, founder of the Al Khalifa dynasty.

After he settled in Bahrain, Yousuf Al-Shatar married a Bahraini girl who bore him two sons — Abdulla and Hassan — followed by two daughters, the elder of

whom was Amina. His wife died immediately after the birth of her fifth child Ibrahim in 1855. As for the younger of her two daughters, she was called Fatima, married Muhammed Kanoo and was the mother of Ibrahim Kanoo (known as 'The Great').

After the death of his wife Amina, Ahmed ibn Ibrahim in 1859 married the daughter of Muhammed Hajji, one of the most important merchants in Persia and Bahrain at that time. She bore him a son Hassan ibn Ahmed and a daughter Shaikha, who subsequently became the mother of Qassim and Ali, the sons of Ahmed Kanoo.

Ahmed ibn Ibrahim built up his trade — mainly timber and shipbuilding — with the help of his father-in-law Muhammed Hajji, who taught him principles of buying and selling and business practice. His trade developed and thrived because of his probity and humility. He was also known for his generosity towards small businessmen, whose timber he would transport without cost. Indeed my grandfather Ibrahim used to tell my father Khalil that most of the profit on timber was distributed free to the poor. In his youth Ahmed had taken part in several historically famous battles in Bahrain — the battle of Qazqaz, in which the Sultan of Oman, Saeed Al-Maskati, was repulsed and the battle of Al-Doulab in which he routed his enemy Muhammed ibn Abdulla.

Because of the respect and esteem in which he was held by all ranks of society, Ahmed became the confidant of Fahd bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, the maternal uncle of the then ruler of Bahrain, His Highness Shaikh Isa bin Ali, who praised him ceaselessly, citing his valour and courage in battle. In spite of his lack of proficiency in reading and writing, Ahmed continued to enjoy the society of Bahraini savants and scholars until his death on 26 June 1896 at the age of 74 years.

My grandfather Ibrahim bin Ahmed was born on 25 November 1855. He was handsome, good-natured and of medium height with a powerful physique. He was admired by family and friends alike for his loyalty, his probity and his mental acuity. He was also known for his abstemious nature and his unselfishness — his friendships were not dictated by commercial interest; indeed he favoured the company of poor Nejdīs with whom he felt affinity and affection.

My grandfather Ibrahim started in business working for his father in 1868. His

first commercial ventures were very profitable, which increased his father's confidence in him. On his business trips to India my father learnt the secrets of shipping and measuring timber and other commercial information which, together with his good reputation, excellent memory and fair dealing, helped him to become one of the most important timber merchants in Bahrain.

However, in spite of his success, my grandfather was not ambitious, for he never worked more than four hours a day. No matter how important any commercial proposition offered to him, he refused to work outside these hours. His faith in people led him to open up his store to Iranian traders who came to Bahrain to buy the Malabar wood in which he dealt and which was used in shipbuilding. His stock was often pilfered but he was unconcerned, believing that what was stolen he was not fated to keep. He ran his business instinctively and simply, relying on his excellent memory to remember the details of his commercial transactions. He would record these on the wall of his store and later transfer them to a small notebook so as not to forget them.

My grandfather tended to be a recluse, a trait which is still evident in some members of the family. He rarely visited his friends although they were few in number; however, he welcomed them warmly when they went to visit him. The following incident, which some find astonishing, demonstrates how reclusive he was.

The Political Adviser, newly-arrived in Bahrain, Charles Belgrave sent a message to my grandfather's office requesting the attendance of my father in his capacity as a well-known businessman. My grandfather was at a loss as to how to contact his son since he did not know where his shop was, not having set foot in the souk for a long time, and not having an employee available to send for him at the time. So, he was forced to go himself and inform his son of the Adviser's request — but how could he go to him if he did not know the way to his shop? He asked everyone he encountered if they knew where his son Khalil's shop was but had no luck until he came across a man called Abdulrahman Bassam who was sitting in his shop. He asked him, 'Can you direct me to my son's shop? He is Khalil ibn Ibrahim.' The man laughed and replied, 'Are you serious? You don't know where your son's shop is?' Ibrahim replied resignedly, 'No, my friend, I don't. I haven't been into the souk for thirty years!'

Amazed, Abdulrahman Bassam led my grandfather to the shop only to find my father even more amazed since my grandfather had never visited him there

before. After welcoming him, he asked the reason for the visit and, on being told, went off to honour the Adviser's request.

After the death of his first wife, my grandfather married Latifa Ahmed Kanoo, sister of the well-known merchant Yousuf bin Ahmed Kanoo. She was the mother of all his children, giving birth successively to four boys and four girls, the only ones to survive beyond childhood being my father Khalil, our uncle Ahmed father of my wife Aisha, our uncle Muhammed surnamed Kanoo, father of Ibrahim Muhammed Al-Moayyed, chairman of the daily newspaper Akhbar AIKhaleej. The surviving daughters were Amina and Fatima, wife of Ahmed ibn Hassan, famous for his erudition and learning.

My grandfather Ibrahim passed away on September 8 1928. He was one of the leading timber merchants of his day but I feel I must mention other leading businessmen from this period of Bahrain's economic development, such as Yousuf bin Abdulrahman Fakhro and Muhammed bin Abdulla Al-Dawi. At that time competition between merchants was not intense since the majority of them were working in different fields such as selling cloth, foodstuffs and household utensils, pearling and fishing.

My father was born on 26 March 1890 and subsequently named Khalil Ibrahim Al-Moayyed. He chose the surname Al-Moayyed for the members of his family because of the confusion that had arisen between his name and that of Khalil bin Ibrahim (father of Ibrahim Khalil Kanoo) who also worked in commerce and who became known subsequently as Khalil Ibrahim Kanoo.

My father chose the name Al-Moayyed out of admiration for the well-known Egyptian newspaper with the same name and my cousin was named Moayed Ahmed Al-Moayed as a good omen for the new family name. Later, the two families used the name Al-Moayyed on official documents.

My father Khalil went to the Yousuf Khunji Qur'anic school with his brother Ali who died when he was still a young boy. My father had a sharp mind, a good memory and a sociable and attractive personality. He also had a sound knowledge of Arabic, which endeared him to his father Ibrahim and his maternal grandfather Ahmed Kanoo and, in spite of his youth, he liked the company of scholars and older people.

My father had his first taste of travel when he went abroad in 1902 with his

uncle Hassan (father of the late Ahmed ibn Hassan), an experience that broadened his horizons and increased his knowledge since Hassan (who later became my maternal uncle by the marriage of his daughter Aisha to my father) was well known in intellectual circles in Bahrain at that time.

In the following year (1903) he took a small quantity of pearls to India to sell and was so successful in this venture that it was decided that he should go again the following year with a large collection of pearls worth 100,000 rupees. There was general astonishment that such a young man should undertake responsibility for such a valuable cargo on a journey fraught with difficulties which would daunt many an older man.

In 1906 my father married his first wife Aisha Ahmed Behzad who bore him 6 sons, two of whom died when they were children. At that time my father was travelling extensively, trading in pearls on his own account. All his business trips had been successful but in 1927 he split from his father and his brothers and worked to build up his pearl business on the strength of his fairness and honesty in dealing with his customers.

My father next married my mother Aisha Hassan who gave birth to a daughter who died in infancy and then myself on 21 Ramadan 1336 (7 July 1918) after which she was afflicted with an incurable disease and passed away at the age of 28 years. My father then entered into a succession of marriages and had a total of 34 children.

In spite of his innate intelligence, my father was not a successful administrator in his business or private life. He did not give enough thought to the future but preferred to do good, help the needy and intercede on their behalf with those in authority by virtue of the high regard in which he was held by the ruler of Bahrain, Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa. The latter was like a brother and a friend to my father, whom he respected and whose forthright opinions, for which he was famous, he listened to. He accepted his criticisms tolerantly, valuing the patriotic spirit in which they were made. In addition to his liberality and generosity with his own money, my father had considerable mental fortitude, not informing anyone — not even his sons — of his financial troubles.

My father was an amiable man, a lively conversationalist, a man of learning with a charming personality who was constantly attracted to poets and writers and those who, out of patriotic feeling, advocated social progress in Bahrain. He

participated in popular efforts to make education official for boys in 1919 by joining a committee of merchants, headed by Mijbal AIDhakhir, uncle Yousuf Ahmed Kanoo and Shaikh Abdulla bin Hassan Al-Dosary, who went to the ruler's majlis at Suwaifiyya near the seashore in Manama in 1919. For this occasion my late father composed an ode (recorded on tape as a family souvenir and quoted below in Arabic) in which he exhorted the ruler of Bahrain, Shaikh Isa bin Ali Al Khalifa to support the educational revival in his country. In the ode he praises the ruler for the benefits of his reign and points out that science has revived and rejuvenated every country which previously suffered from ignorance. He praises the Shaikh's sons — Hamad, Muhammed and Abdulla — stating that they, with their talents, represent a hope for their country but the greatest hope rests with the ruler himself, through whose actions Bahrain's voice can be heard in the councils of the world.

The effect of the ode was to motivate those present to found the first official boys' school in Bahrain. In view of the scarcity of financial resources in the Gulf states at that time and their parlous financial position before the discovery of oil, Shaikh Isa bin Ali invited the people to hold a meeting to collect contributions in order to build the school.

Two weeks after this meeting, the Ruler of Bahrain asked his son Shaikh Abdulla bin Isa to hold a public reception in Muharraq which was attended by 250 people. Because of his enthusiastic desire to spread knowledge and education, Shaikh Abdulla had contributed the sum of 20,000 rupees. My late father, inspired by Shaikh Abdulla's efforts to initiate formal education for boys in Bahrain, composed an ode which those present at the reception, aware of his poetic and rhetorical skills, asked him to recite. In the ode which he recited he expressed his thanks and congratulations to Shaikh Abdulla for his efforts to revive the light of learning in his country and for his generous gift which would raise the status of Bahrain and earn him the gratitude of his people. He voiced his own personal satisfaction that one of his dearest hopes had been realised and his joy that the interests of the nation had been furthered.

Thus, by private and public efforts the first boys' school, the AlHidaya Al-Khalifiyya School in Muharraq, was built in 1919 at a cost of 200,000 rupees with the finest quality stone, brought from the island of Jeddah. The Al-Hidaya Al-Khalifiyya School in Manama, which I attended, was established in 1921 and, in 1926, the Al-Khamis School for pupils from the villages surrounding Manama like Jidhafs, Sanabis, and Bilad Al-Qadim. In the same year an

Education Committee was formed, with the late Shaikh Abdulla bin Isa appointed as chairman, in view of his constant efforts to establish formal education in the country. Two more boys' schools were opened in 1927 — the Al-Hidaya Al-Khalifiyya School in Hidd and the Al-Hidaya Al-Khalifiyya School in East Riffa.

My father, in conjunction with a number of prominent men of learning and discernment, played a role in convincing the authorities of the necessity of women's education. It was largely as a result of their efforts that Shaikh Isa bin Ali in 1928 was persuaded to establish the first regular school for women in the house of Shaikh Abdulrahman bin Muhammed Al-Zayani, one of the leading supporters for women's education. The first girls' teacher appointed was Mariam Abdulla Zayani and the first headmistress was Fatima Bayyat. The following year the Mijbal Al-Dhakhir School for girls was opened in Manama, so called after the owner of the premises who, together with other local notables, was a strong advocate for women's education.

All the female members of our family studied in this school before transferring to the Aisha Umm Al-Mu'minin School, which had been converted from a boys' school into a girls' school. When it opened, there were 140 girl pupils and four female teachers, two of whom were Syrian and two were Bahraini. My father's efforts to serve the community did not stop there; he also worked hard to get the authorities to support Women's Associations materially and morally. It was through his efforts that the Bahraini Young Ladies Association was able to obtain a gift of land from the authorities on which to build their headquarters. He worked tirelessly to persuade the authorities to fulfil the requests of Bahraini citizens who turned to him for help, and Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, the Ruler, who cherished a particular love and affection for my father, would urge the authorities to respond to his charitable efforts.

In 1925 my late father with a group of citizens, in particular Mijbal Al-Dhakhir, were instrumental in persuading the authorities of the importance of providing drinking water for the inhabitants by drilling artesian wells, instead of transporting it from natural springs, scattered throughout the island or in the sea, small pools or coastal wells like the Shariba well.

To this end my father recited an ode at a public meeting attended by the Ruler of Bahrain and local worthies. In the ode he urges the Ruler, as a seasoned traveller, to look thoughtfully and judiciously at Bahrain and compare it with other lands.

He will notice that the population is often thirsty. The poet's heart grieves to see poor people going thirsty and he addresses his verse to the Emir, confident in the knowledge that he will accede to his plea. Until his death in 1963 my father concerned himself with the community's problems, petitioning those in authority in order to find solutions.

He also helped to set up the first town council in Bahrain in 1919 and was appointed to the council along with a number of other prominent citizens and served as a member until 1925. He contributed actively to literary and cultural societies, which helped to disseminate knowledge and learning throughout Bahrain. He helped to set up the first literary club, Al-Nadi Al-Adabi, whose members included the late Abdulla Al-Zayed, the late Nasr Khayri and my maternal uncle Ahmed bin Hassan Ibrahim. Together with these same individuals he helped to found AIMuntada Al-Islami (The Islamic Assembly). However, in 1935 it was those of my generation who founded new literary and cultural clubs such as Al-Nadi Al-Ahli, Nadi Al-Muharraq and Nadi Al-Uruba.

In short, my father (God rest his soul) was ever more concerned with social and literary work in the service of his country than with persevering in his chosen career, the pearl trade. He married many times and had a total of 34 children, of whom I was the fifth.

The Al-Moayyed family today exceeds 200 individuals, working in all sectors of the state, both public and private, and contributing through their regular and voluntary work to the progress and prosperity of Bahrain.

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