

Researching family roots and the Strand Muslim community: from 'Voorburg' to Lower Gordons Bay Road, Strand

Ebrahim Rhoda

'It has been a fascinating journey researching the history of my family and my home town - with oral traditions in family, mosque and community, as well as archival records, showing the way. I am proud that in 2008 the eighth generation descendants of the free black Kalamodien Rode and his wife, Jaria Rode, former slave, are still residents in the Strand, in their own houses along Lower Gordons Bay Road and elsewhere.'

Ebrahim Rhoda has long been interested in the history of his own family and the history of the Muslim community of the Strand where he grew up. He retired as principal of the Strand Moslem Primary School in 1993. In 2001 he participated in a short training programme at the archives for a group of community-based researchers, run by the Slavery and Heritage Project of UCT and UWC. In 2003 at the age of 65 and with no prior degrees, he received a National Research Foundation scholarship for a Masters degree in history at UWC. In 2006 he was awarded a distinction for his thesis, '*The founding and development of the Strand Muslim community, 1822-1928*'. He has written three booklets to share his research findings with community members: *The Strand Muslim community and the Javanese connection*; *Die Strand Moslem Gemeenskap - 'n historiese oorsig*; and *The Islamic da'wah from the Auwal Masjid in the Bo-Kaap to Mosterd Bay (Strand), 1792-1838*. He is a founder-member of the Cape Family Research Forum.

Tracing family roots - back to the time of slavery

I was bitten by the research bug and became passionately curious to know where my forebears came from. According to a fifth generation descendant of the Muslim Rhodas, the late Gadija Wentzel¹ (born Rhoda), the forebears of the Muslim Rhodas² of the Strand were two slave brothers, Leander and Jacobus. When slavery finally ended at the Cape in 1838 the two brothers settled at Mosterd Bay, became fishermen and embraced Islam. Leander was renamed Faggedien and Jacobus was renamed Samodien. According to Deeds Office records, the name Mosterd Bay for the area today known as the Strand was already in use in 1714 when it was shown as the southern boundary of the farm 'Vlooibaai'.³

My first task was to establish when and where the two brothers died. I started with the Slave Registers of farms in Hottentots Holland, one of the six wards in the Stellenbosch

district. From 1816 it was compulsory for slaveholders to keep a register of all their slaves including those born into slavery. I hoped to find a record of when the brothers died, and their age, so that I could work out approximate dates of birth. Then I could search for two slave brothers named Leander and Jacobus, born in those years on a specific farm or farms in a specific area. Death notices I found in the Cape Archives enabled me to establish that Faggendien Rode was born in 1819 and died in 1912 and Samodien Rode was born in 1824 and died in 1911.⁴ Both died at Somerset Strand. Samodien's death notice also revealed that his parents were Kalamodien and Jaria Rode.⁵

The next step was daunting: how to find two slave brothers, Leander and Jacobus - not uncommon slave names - who were born in 1819 and 1824, in a slave register of some slaveholder, presumably in the Hottentots Holland area. This task was made much easier when I got talking to one of my fellow-researchers in the Cape Archives, Jody Sarich of Chicago, who had compiled the records of the slaves of the Morkel family of Hottentots Holland. That kind of sharing among researchers can be immensely valuable.

Leander and Jacobus were registered in the slave register of Willem Morkel of the farm '*Voorburg*.' Leander was born on 1 March 1819 and Jacobus on 1 September 1824. The two brothers were registered on 3 April 1819 and 24 November 1824 respectively. Their mother, Kandaza, was first registered on 5 December 1816 when she was already 25 years old and the register indicated that she was born at the Cape. Thus, Kandaza was born in 1791,⁶ probably on the farm '*Voorburg*'. Her husband, Kalamodien, was a free black resident who was listed on the census of Mosterd Bay.⁷ In 1839 Kalamodien (Kameding) of Mosterd Bay was acquitted in a court case after he had been accused of receiving stolen grapes which two youths had stolen from the farm of Hendrik Johannes Morkel.⁸

'*Voorburg*' and '*Onverwacht*' [*De Bos*] were among the extensive farms owned by the Morkel family in this period.⁹ What is now the Bridge Water Housing Estate in Somerset West, as well as the area of Van der Stel and a great stretch of land south of the N2 Freeway near Van der Stel, would have been within the boundaries of '*Voorburg*'. The Lourens River meandered through the farm to False Bay. The oldest bridge¹⁰ in the country, in present-day Somerset West, was actually built on '*Voorburg*' and the road leading to the Hottentots Holland Kloof, present-day Sir Lowry's Pass, actually passed through *Voorburg*. To cross the pass travellers had to pay at the tollgate. This tollgate once stood on a site in front of where Vergelegen Medicity is today, where the road branches off from Somerset West to the Strand. On this historic farm the matriarch of the Muslim Rhoda family was born.

In 1829 Willem Morkel Senior must have been in some financial difficulty because the Mortgage Register in the Cape Archives reflects that he offered Kandaza, Leander and Jacobus, along with seventeen of their fellow-slaves as collateral for a loan of 16,000 rixdollars from Pieter Gerhard van Zyl.¹¹ Four years away from final freedom in 1838, Kandaza was appraised for £90-10-0d whilst Leander and Jacobus were valued at £90 and £75.¹²

I cannot pinpoint the exact date when Kandaza and her two sons, Leander and Jacobus, joined the settlement at Mosterd Bay. By 1838 there had been an Islamic enclave at

Mosterd Bay for sixteen years - the story of how this remarkable settlement came about is told in the booklet, '*The Strand Muslim community and the Javanese connection*'.¹³ Kandaza was given the name of Jaria, which in Arabic means slave girl,¹⁴ most probably by one of the imams at Mosterd Bay. Leander was renamed Faggendien and Jacobus became Samodien.

Samodien Rode (Rhode) was my great-greatgrandfather. The Muslim Rhoda family was most probably united at Mosterd Bay before 1849 as Faggendien's eldest daughter, Momena, was born at Mosterd Bay in 1849. Momena's death registration in the Cape Archives indicates that she died at the age of 65 in 1914.¹⁵ Momena was my maternal great-grandmother.

In 1988 my father, Oesman Rhoda, pinpointed the site where his greatgrandfather Samodien Rode had erected his thatch roofed house. My father was born in that house in 1906 and he passed away in 1996 at my house in Firgrove. Samodien's death notice indicated that he had landed property and the site shown to me corresponds with the site of the erf on the Government Surveyor's map of Mosterd Bay dated 1879.¹⁶ Samodien Rode eventually received the small erf, which he had occupied illegally, as a quitrent grant by virtue of the Mosterd Bay Crown Lands Act of 1881.¹⁷ In 1904 Samodien Rode bonded his property for £100 with Johannes Petrus Roux. At the time of his death in 1911 the bond was apparently not settled and the property was transferred to Johannes Petrus Roux on 1 March 1913. Lulu Rhoda, my grandfather, must have been in a position to settle the bond because in 1914 the erf was registered in his name. The erf was finally sold to Abraham Gideon Braaf in 1923.¹⁸ Today this erf is occupied by a double-storey building on the corner of Abegglan Street and Anderson Street.

Living memories of the Strand Muslim community

I was born in 1938 in a rented house in Fagan Street close to the Strand Moslem Primary School, not far from the site where my great-greatgrandfather built his house on Crown land. In 2008 the site where I was born is occupied by a second hand goods business opposite Hendrik Louw Primary School. The old school site on the corner of Abegglan and Fagan Streets is occupied by businesses.

Islam was alive in this little community. There were three mosques in a small area and the three imams each had a turn to deliver the *Jumu`ah* sermon. The Market Street Mosque where my father first took us for *Jumu`ah*, Friday congregational prayer, was the first place of worship to be erected in the Strand in the 1870s.¹⁹ The Nurul Anwar Mosque, built in 1885 by Gatiep Railoun from Java, was a stone's throw away from our house in Fagan Street, and not far from the Nurul Islam Mosque.

I can still visualize the Market Square where Mohamed Bagus had his double-storey house and shop below. That building is still there today, but somewhat changed. Next door my grandfather, Lulu Rhoda had his barbershop and next door to him, Boeta Jalalie Gabier later did shoe repairs. This area was later occupied by Dorringtons Garage and today Lewis Furniture Store occupies the site.

On the Wesley Street side of the Market in the mid-1940s you had a few houses, Mr Hollum the shoemaker, Hassiem's café, Wallab Dallab's café, the entrance to the arcade, Mr

Starck's fish shop, my father's tailor shop, the butchery, Tannie Koewa's house, Imam Doenie Baderoen's fish shop and Mrs. Jacobson's grocery. This would bring us to Abegglan Street. Opposite Mrs Jacobson's shop was Dival's Bakery and I can still see the horse-drawn bakery 'vans' on Market Square and the horses being taken to the water trough. Today all this is no more, replaced by Friedman and Cohen, the Old Mutual Building and Arcade, and other businesses and highrise buildings.

On the Abegglan Street side of the Market, Mr Hassan Khan and later Hadj Abbas Noor had a shop. Next door was Mr Holden's dairy and the house, according to oral tradition, where Imam Taliép Cassiem once lived. Next was the Moslem butchery where Mr Ritter was the butcher and Mansoer Waggie his '*blokman*', and the house and café of Imam Braim Hercules. In 2008 Shoprite takes up this whole block.

In those years you could leave the front door of your house wide open whilst you walked to the beach front to buy fresh silver fish, *doppies*, from the boats which came in before lunchtime ... On Saturdays the Market Square would be a hive of activity as hawkers and farmers sold their produce. On Saturday evenings every rugby or cricket match would be replayed on the stoeps of Mr Prag's café and the café of Hadj Tape Railoun ...

The Rhodas, like many Muslim and Christian families classified 'coloured', lived in the Strand for generations and made this part of the town as vibrant and alive as District Six - until they were forced out by the Group Areas Act. Many of the families were living in Heyneke, Abegglan, Wesley, Market, Terhoeven, Faure, Fagan and Church Streets, in the heart of the Central Business District of the Strand. Some families owned property but most lived in rented houses. The Group Areas Act led to the total destruction of this neighbourhood in the mid 1960s and the community was scattered in the new 'coloured' residential areas of Rusthof. The rows of houses made way for businesses, parking lots, open squares and highrise buildings. Today in 2008, the three mosques established by our forebears which stand proudly, in defiance of the inhumane system of apartheid.

¹ A transcription of the oral history of the Muslim Rhoda-family was done in 1968 by Anwar Rhoda, a 6th generation Muslim Rhoda from the line of Fagedien Rhoda. The narrator was his aunt, Gadija Wentzel, nee Rhoda, who was born in 1900 and was 12 years old when Fagedien Rhoda died. I am deeply indebted to Anwar Rhoda for all this information because it enabled me to trace our forebears to *Voorburg*.

² I have also traced the origins of the Rhodas of the Christian faith to the farms *Vergelegen* and *De Bos* in the Hottentots Holland area when the Theunissens and the Morkels were the respective owners in the early nineteenth century, but that would be a story on its own.

³ J. Van der Byl, (1963) *Eenaars van Erwe in die Stellenbosch 1693-1860 en Eenaars van Plase in die distrikk van Stellenbosch 1680-1860*, unpublished work (1994). I am most grateful to Dr. H. Heese of Stellenbosch University Archives for making this source available to me.

⁴ WCARS: (Western Cape Archives Records Service) HAWC 1/3/43/6/1, death registration of Fagedien Rhoda and MOOC 6/9/671, folio 1824, death notice of Samodien Rode.

⁵ WCARS: MOOC 6/9/671, folio 1824, death notice of Samodien Rode.

⁶ WCARS: S0 6/94, Slave Register of Willem Morkel, Willerm's zoon, p. 85.

⁷ WCARS: *Opgaafrol* J302 to J307. The name Kameding appears on the *Opgaafrolle* of 1834 to 1837 of Mosterd Bay. In *Opgaafrol* J307 for the year 1837, Hendrik Ryk de Vos, the field-cornet for Hottentots

Holland indicated that Kameding [Kalamodien] refused to sign (*niet willen teken*) on the census list. Ragiema Crombie, nee Rhoda narrated to the writer on 9 April 1990 at Firgrove that Kalamodien's elder son, Faggiedien, also named one of his sons Kalamdien and that Samodien's daughter and granddaughter was named Jaria.

⁸ WCARS: 1/STB 4/1/1/4, Criminal Records 1828-1837, Case no. 697.

⁹ Peggy Heap, *The Story of Hottentots Holland* (Somerset West: Peggy Heap, 1993, p. 71 and p.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.

¹¹ WCARS: SO 9/22, Mortgage Register

¹² WCARS: SO 13/20, Appraisalment of Slaves 1834-35, Return no. 396, p.34, being the list of slaves of the farm, *Voorburg* of Willem Morkel Junior.

¹³ WCARS: *Opgaafrol* J268 for Hottentots Holland for the year 1822 lists the name of [Imam] Abdol Sammat.

¹⁴ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (ed. J.Milton Cowan)(Beirut: Libraire du Liban, 1980), p. 122.

¹⁵ WCARS: HAWC 1/3/43/5/1, Death registration of Momena Wentzel, nee Rhoda.

¹⁶ WCARS: M4/845, Government Surveyor's map of Mosterd Bay 1879.

¹⁷ WCARS: CCP 6/2//1/23, Mosterd Bay Crown Lands Act 1881.

¹⁸ Deeds Office, Cape Town: Strand Erf Register, Vol. 5, Erf no1266.

¹⁹ Deeds Office, Cape Town: Strand Erf Register, Vol. 5. The mosque and a house situated on Lot 27 according the Mosterd Bay Government Surveyor's Map of 1879 was first registered on 27 October 1882 as a Quitrent grant in the name of Baderoen Priest. According to the preamble to the Mosterd Bay Crown Lands Act of 1881 many dwellings [most probably the mosque too] had been illegally erected on Crown Lands. It is thus not absolutely certain when the mosque was constructed. Lot 27 became Erf 418.