



Taufiq, *Goma* group drummer, Diu, 2006

The Sidi An introduction by Mahmood Mamdani

AS AN EAST AFRICAN OF INDIAN ORIGIN, I WAS USED TO BEING DIFFERENT no matter where I was. But then I visited Mumbai in the early 1970s. Being in Mumbai was different. For a start, most people looked like me. In another week, though, I was in for a shock: even though we spoke the same language, we did not always seem to understand one another. It was clear from the occasional blank stare on their faces and the lack of comprehension on mine that we did not always share the same sensibilities. It is in India in 1971 that I first realized the sense in which I was an African.

Now, in December of 2008, I was back in Mumbai, this time at the start of a different kind of journey, invited by my friend Ketaki to join in her travels around Gujarat, visiting Indian communities of African origin. She promised a bonus: a diversion from Jamnagar to the village of Hadiyana, from which my great-grandfather had set out for the eastern coast of Africa over a hundred years ago. The diversion was indeed a treat. In and around Jamnagar, I discovered food that I had come to think of as a family specialty: *churma na ladu* (a dessert made of wheat) and *batakia* (a yoghurt-based breakfast dish made from left-over unleavened millet bread). The joy of discovery continued with the realization that the Gujarati I spoke shared much with the local dialect in Hadiyana.

In Diu, I would discover a commonality in the Gujarati spoken by the Wahindi, East Africans of Indian descent, and the Sidi, Indians of African descent: on both sides of the ocean, our spoken Gujarati was sprinkled with Kiswahili words. I had discovered during earlier visits to India that words that I had grown up thinking of as Gujarati—*sokoni* [kitchen], *pasi* [iron], *funiko* [lid], *fagiyo* [broom]—were actually Kiswahili words. Now, I marvelled as I talked to Naginaben Adam of Diu, an elderly grandmother in her 90s, her speech punctuated with Kiswahili words: *mashamba* [farm], *mzee* [an elder], *hodi* [a greeting], *karibu* [welcome] *jambo sana* [very well]. In the days that followed, my list of Kiswahili words in the spoken Gujarati of African immigrants from the Mozambican coast kept on growing.



Naginaben Adam in her home, Diu, 2006

Origins

Ask the Sidi where they came from, and you will get various answers. Having done some background reading prior to the journey—and since—I was aware that the Sidi experience in India spans over a millennium. However, scholarship on the Sidi is very much in the preliminary stages. Not only does it rely on fragmentary information, it also tends to be heavily politicised—why the historical information that I sketch here should be taken as provisional.

Sidi immigration to India occurred in successive historical periods. The basic division was the 16th century, distinguishing two eras, Portuguese and pre-Portuguese, modern and pre-modern. The Greek *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, now dated to between 40 and 70 CE, focuses on the trading network that linked the East African, Arabian and West Indian coasts. Besides being traders, armed African sailors from the Somali and Swahili coast were among those who guaranteed freedom of movement for ships on the Indian Ocean in the pre-Portuguese era. Africans had also been a prominent presence among pearl divers in various communities along the Indian Ocean. None of these were slaves; they were all free persons.

African slave-soldiers first came to India in the 9th century as part of Arab-led armies that occupied Sindh, and then in the more successful Central Asian invasions from the 13th to 16th centuries. By the 16th century, the Sidi had become prominent in the cavalry and the artillery of many an Indian principality. The most prominent in the history books is Malik (King) Amber (1548-1626), credited with having stopped the Moghul expansion in the Deccan. Born in the Kambata region of southern Ethiopia, and named Chapu, he was sold in the Red Sea port of Mocha, taken to Baghdad and sold again to a prominent merchant who recognised his superior intellectual qualities, and educated and raised him as a Muslim, named Amber. He was then taken to the Deccan. There, he was bought by one Chengiz Khan, a chief minister of the Nizam of Ahmadnagar. Chengiz Khan was himself a Habshi and a former slave. As Moghul pressure on the Sultanate increased, the polity turned to new groups – first Habshis, then Marathas – to bolster its armies. Habshis were incorporated into the army in growing numbers from 1600 when Malik Amber became the first African regent and *peshwa*. He is said to



Hirbaiben Lobi in her farm, Jambur, 2009

have imported as many as 10,000 Ethiopian slaves, appointing many to take charge of strategic forts along the Deccan plateau and the Konkan seaboard. This included the spectacular island fortress of Janjira, some 50 miles south of modern Mumbai. Like his patron Chengiz Khan, Malik Amber too moved from slave to free lancer to commander to slave-owning commander (Eaton, 2005). Besides the ruling families of Jafarabad in Janjira, royal Sidi include ruling families of Hyderabad, Aurangabad, the former Sidi principalities of Radhanpur in Kathiawar, northern Gujarat, and Sachin, near the port of Surat. They are said to marry only among themselves or with upper caste Indian Muslims.

At the other end of this social scale are ordinary Sidi, most of whom are descendants of slaves brought by the Portuguese from further down the East African coast, mainly from their possession of Mozambique. Unsure of the loyalty of Indian recruits after 1857, the Portuguese even brought slave-soldiers from Brazil to Goa (Walker, 2006). The big difference with Atlantic slavery was that hardly any slaves were brought to India to provide cheap labour. After all, the caste system and related feudal-type practices provided the upper caste with an almost unlimited pool of cheap labour. Compared to these, slaves were an expensive affair. Their main attraction was not their cheapness, but their loyalty. In this context, slaves are best thought of as lifelong servants of ruling or upper caste families.

Sidi family histories range from relatively clear recollections of those who were once high and mighty to the dim memories of the more humble folk. Ahmedi Begum Khan, a member of the royal family of Janjira, the 17th century Sidi island state off the Mumbai coast, told us: “We came as soldiers and created a state. A lot of slaves came with us. We are from Northern Africa: Abyssinia, Morocco. Our ancestors came in the 15th century. We worked for Bijapur. The ancestors got the land from the King of Bijapur.”

The more humble came to serve pre-British princely families as slave-soldiers. Today, some of their offspring live in Jambur and Sirwan, two contemporary Sidi villages, the former in Gir forest and the latter in its vicinity, each between 500 and 600 households. Says Shahnawaz, “We came as soldiers with rajas. My *dada's* [grandfather's] family came from Sudan. I



Jamadar Abdul Gafoor Haji Kassam in his workshop, Bhuj, 2009

am fifth generation. They came with Jairaj Singh [of Baroda] on service. They were cooks. My grandfather was a policeman.”

The Sidi attitude to the past is best illustrated by two of its leaders: one a community organizer in Gir, the other a community intellectual in Bhuj. Hirbaiben Lobi, the community organizer in Jambur, is celebrated for organizing around 600 women, all from households where men had taken to drinking and gambling. When I asked her how she did it, she said once she had convinced the women of the importance of saving, it was not difficult to get husbands to join in return for the promise that they would get to make decisions jointly with their wives.

So rooted is Hirbaiben in the present that she seems to have neither time nor inclination to focus on the past, “We came from Oba. I don’t know where it is, not Mozambique, maybe Sudan. We came to protect the land.” Many in Jambur shared her rootedness in the here and now. Asked where his ancestors came from, Sidhubhai said without a second thought: “How do I know? All I know is that I am from here. They say they came from Africa. But our grandparents came from here. Who knows which ancestors came from Africa?” It was an attitude common among most Sidi. This is how Munaf, a 29-year-old driver in Dhroll, outside of Jamnagar, put it, “I have no idea of from where and why the family came. Never thought of Africa.”

If the Sidi of Jambur and Sirwan have a dim memory of where their ancestors came from, those in Diu are of more recent origin, most having been brought after the Portuguese arrival in India. Says Nagina Adam, “My grandfather came from Mozambique with his parents. He married here. He worked in a *mashamba* [a Swahili word for a farm]. We came freely. The owner was a Muslim from Diu.” She claimed that, though owned, they had not come as captives, and their social condition resembled more that of servants than slaves.

If Hirbaiben was deeply committed to *changing* the deplorable conditions that shackle her community, Jamadar Abdul Gafoor Haji Kassam, an electrical engineer who runs his own shop in Bhuj, Kutch, and who we met at the end of our short trip to Kathiawar, was just as deeply committed to *reflecting* on these conditions. Abdulbhai had turned the study of history



Sidi *Goma* group perform in a dargah, Jamnagar, 2008

into a part-time preoccupation. He spoke alternately in English and Gujarati: “I made my own research, bothered by why my colour was fair [he has a wheaty complexion].” He then went on to give me an outline history of the Sidi in India, “We entered Hindustan in 8th c. ... Habshis used to go from Saudi Arabia to China ... Research is important because we are asleep and we need to wake up.” There followed a long and detailed historical account, drawn from multiple authors ranging from the Persian historian Farishta to the Arab historian Hiti to British colonial histories of Sindh. He brought out volumes—written in his own hand—each a summary translation into Gujarati of a published work by one of these authors. Leafing through them, he spoke of the deeds of Sidi commanders, administrators and travellers, taking particular pride in the exploits of Habshi Sujja, who he said came from Eritrea, and was given command of the Arab naval force that conquered Sindh.

He was clearly excited that the archaeological remains of what Habshi Sujja built had just been excavated in Pakistan. Abdul Gafoor spoke as a community intellectual [I kept thinking of Gramsci’s organic intellectual], often as if in a stream of thought, shifting from soft recollection to a passionate rave, as he spoke of injustice and double standards in the contemporary world. Punning on George Bush, Jr., he said his project was “to manufacture Weapons of Mass Discussion” [this in English]. As he served me tea, he remarked that his brother’s grandson was born the same day the Iraqi journalist Muntassir threw a shoe at President Bush, and then proudly declared, “I named my grandson Muntassir after that brave journalist!”

Identity: The Progeny of Hazrat Bilal

When I encountered these Indians of African descent, I was struck by the difference between them and the community I come from (Africans of Indian descent). I could not help but notice how much more assimilated they were in Indian society than I and my contemporaries are in African society. The estimated number of Sidi in India today (mostly in Gujarat and Karnataka), ranges from 35,000 to 70,000, probably a third of Wahindi (Africans of Indian descent) in East Africa, if you exclude recent immigrants from India.



Sidi group from Ahmedabad perform the *Goma* at the African Diaspora Conference, Goa, 2006

The Sidi of Gujarat speak Gujarati as their mother tongue. Besides language, they have assimilated dress and food. Whenever I asked a Sidi person I met whether they thought of themselves as African or Indian, I inevitably got a quizzical look. What, they seemed to think, was wrong with me: they were, of course, Indians.

The only ‘East African Indians’—as we are now known—who have gone through an experience of cultural assimilation of some depth are those of Zanzibar and other old coastal towns of pre-colonial vintage. The coastal experience spans several centuries. In contrast, Indian presence in the African hinterland is hardly a century old. These differences notwithstanding, there is much to learn from different notions of home, among the Sidi in India and the Wahindi in East Africa.

So totally integrated are the Sidi into Indian life that I could not identify Sidi culture with a distinctive food or language or clothes or dwellings. The exception to this observation, and an important one, is to be found in the world of song, dance and spirituality. The Sidi have retained something of their African spiritual world in the form of musical instruments, dances and spirit possession cults. At the same time, this spiritual heritage has been their point of entry into the world of Indian Sufism. Sidi are prominent as wandering *faqirs* [holy men]. Sidi communities perform sacred dances to the rhythm of instruments that evoke an African origin: a small drum called *dhamal*, a big drum called *madido*, a foot drum called *mugarman*, a coconut rattle called *mai mishra*, and a trumpet called *nafir*, alongside other instruments. This dance is known as *goma*, from the Swahili word *ngoma*, meaning both drum and dance.

Their music and dance, which usually go together, are a spiritual offering to the Sidi saint, Bawa Ghor. There are two common legends about Bawa Ghor. One has him as an Abyssinian named Sidi Mubarak Nobi [“the blessed saint from Nubia”] who is said to have arrived in the 13th century and developed the foundations of the Sidi settlement in Jambur. Another has it that he originally came from Kano in northern Nigeria to Sudan, and then to the pilgrimage at Mecca. A wealthy merchant, he settled in the Rajpipla Hills near Bharuch and Khambat, where he developed a flourishing trade



Farida Kassambhai Al-Mumbrik, bank teller and guide, Surendranagar, 2006

in agate, a semi-precious stone known as *akik* in India. Varieties of agate are named after him (Baba Ghor) and his sister, Mai Misra, who succeeded him. Baba Ghor is credited with developing the agate trade and introducing the Sidi into trading networks that reached as far as Africa, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. During his travels to Mecca and southern Iraq, he is said to have studied with Rifa'i Sufis, earning from their leader the honorific title, Baba Ghaur [Arabic: "revered master of deep meditation"]. Wherever we went, we found Sidi shrines to Bawa Ghor, each a gathering place for the surrounding Sidi community. Today, these shrines are widely revered across communities: Muslims, Parsis, Christians and Hindus.

Whenever possible, I would ask those I met to identify what makes the Sidi a separate community. The immediate response was to point to physical or behavioural characteristics. According to Anwar Kassam Al-Mubarik, visiting Kathiawar from Mumbai: "Hair and colour may change, [but] we Sidi have two permanent signs: nose and lips." The alternative view was expressed by Liaqat Ali Haji Kassam Jamadar, the head of the Sidi Jamaat of Bhuj, and brother of Abdul Gafoor, the community intellectual: "Sidi is not an appearance. Many look like that, but are not Sidi. The first test is this: the son of a Sidi knows how to dance."

A third view pointed to history. Once he had talked of appearance, Anwar proudly added that Sidi were not converts to Islam. When it came to religious conviction, they were originals, natives: "We were never taught the *kalma* [the foundational principles of Islam]. We came with the *kalma*."

Sidis identify with Hazrat Bilal. The son of an Ethiopian slave, Bilal was among the Prophet's original circle of followers. Known for his powerful and lyrical voice, he was the first to be chosen by the Prophet to give the call to prayer. According to Liaqat Ali, "Hazrat Bilal's call was: you suffer but don't let others suffer. Hazrat Bilal was called Ashiq e Rasool [the one who loved the Prophet]"

When Sidis identify themselves as the progeny of Hazrat Bilal, they identify their ancestral endowment with particular virtues: trust, a carefree nature, capacity for sacrifice, and so on. Farida Kassambhai Al-Mumbrik, our guide who came from Bhavnagar where she worked as a bank teller, put



Rafique, from Jamnagar, with a community elder, Bedi, 2008

it this way: “Everyone calls us *badshah* [king]. People don’t even know our religion. There is no discrimination. We don’t need permission for anything. ... no matter what problems, we are *bindaas* [without worries].” Says Ebrahim Mohamed of Dhroll: “We say we are the progeny of Hazrat Bilal. We love everybody. We have no record in any police station in India. If anyone has a complaint against a Sidi person, the police will refuse to accept it.” This is, indeed, how the Sidi often distinguished themselves from most Indian Muslims. As original believers [rather than converts], they claimed to be a people worthy of trust no matter how difficult or tempting the conditions.

But others have a negative spin on the proverbial carefree spirit most Sidi associate with themselves. According to Rafiqbhai, also of Jamnagar, “Our blood is lazy blood. Two to three out of 10 have a drinking problem. There is one case of suicide in two years. [True] there is no prostitution, no theft, no murders.” Hershah Kumari, the princess of Jamnagar, in whose household scores of Sidi worked over centuries, put it this way, “Sidi don’t seem to have any ego. In Jambur/Sirwan, all the men are zombies, and women earn.”

Was Sidi the name of a race or an historical experience? Ahmedi Begum Khan of Mumbai thought the meaning of Sidi had been perverted: “The word Sidi is misleading. It is used for slaves. [But] Sidi means Sardar. Sidi is Sayed, lord, sardar.” Gafoorbhai, the electrician who doubled as a part-time community historian, agreed: “In Kathiawar, Sidis are called *Basha*, a Turkish word that means a rank just below Commander General.” But, today, he insisted, ‘Sidi’ is a *gaal* [a swear word], akin to ‘nigger’: the equation of Sidi with “big lips, kinky hair, short memory, black colour, all this is farce,” nothing but “popular prejudice”. “Who knows what blood flows in whom? ... The authors and activists who commercialise our history have demeaned our past and sold us as counterparts of American slaves. They have made our lives miserable. And their caricature is reinforced by uneducated cheap persons who hold their chests out—Sidi,” he thumped his chest in a mocking action, and added, “Our ancestors know that Sidi was a *gaal*.”

Though most often called Sidi, Indians of African origin are sometimes also known as Habshi. Historically, Indians had no single name



Sidi grave with peacocks, Ahmedabad, 2009

for Africans, but different names designating peoples from different parts of Africa, all of which seem to have been borrowed from Arabic. Habshi referred to Abyssinians. Further down, the East African coast was called Zanj, and its inhabitants as Bilad al-Zanj, as by Ibn Battuta, the 14th century Moroccan traveller. In contrast, the land directly south of the Maghrib was known as Bilad al-Sudan (land of the Blacks), al-Sudan being the plural of the Arabic al-aswad [“black”]. Sidi, in contrast, was more of an honorific title. Derived from the Arabic ‘Sayedi’—as pointed out by Ahmed Begum—it meant lord or master. In the nineteenth century, however, the British began to use the term to refer to all African seamen in the Indian Ocean—whether enslaved or freed—thereby turning Sidi into a racial category.

Images of Africa

I was curious what the Sidi thought of Africa, and looked for Sidi who may have sought to return to Africa. Nagina Adam, the 90-year-old grandmother in Diu, told us: “My father prepared a passport. He wanted to go to Africa, but my grandfather would not let him go. He had only two kids.” But Omar Musa, a younger family member, had a different explanation: “Diu people used to go to Mozambique until 1970. After that, Habshis [here meaning black people] of Africa kicked out Indians, including Habshis of India.” It struck me that in this narrative Omar distinguished between Habshis of Africa and Habshis of India: Sidis were neither just Indians nor just Africans, but Habshis of India.

In this instance, too, there was a remarkable difference between Sidi in India and Wahindi of East Africa. Whereas most Wahindi tended to think of India as their ancestral homeland, picturing it through a rose-tinted settler-style romance, the Sidi had become Indian to the point where most shared prevailing Indian prejudices about Africa.

Juma Osman of Jamnagar put it clearly: “We hear Africa is not a place to go to. There, you have *badshahni dadagiri* [gangster-type rule of black persons]. They loot and kill and make money. We don’t like it. We work and make money from our sweat. Lots of Khoja [a local trading community] kids from here have gone to Kinshasa. We were invited to go. We said no. They



Shabana on her way to get married,
Jaffarabad, 2011

said you will get 20,000 Rupees a month. We said 2,000 a month is good enough. They said if your kids come there, you can protect us against African *badshahs*, because you look the same.”

Farida, our guide, told us of a businessman from Bhavnagar, Sureshbhai Joshi, who had spent his business life in Africa. “When he retired, he came to Bhavnagar. He took my grandfather and his friend [Suleimanbhai] to Africa. Sureshbhai and my dada created the Indi-African Association.” Upon return, Farida’s grandfather wrote and published an account of his African trip in Gujarati: *Maro Purwa Afrikano Prawaas* [My East African Journey], by Sidi Abdullah bin Mubarak. As I read it, one thing struck me above all: throughout the account, Farida’s grandfather referred to members of the Indian community in East Africa—and not native communities of Africa—as “our Indian people”.

Sidi Futures

Interested in Sidi perspectives on the wider society, I would often ask: Is it acceptable for a Sidi young person to marry a non-Sidi? I was surprised that opinions were sharply divided, and wondered why. Hirbaiben, the community activist, championed the cause of separate organization: “We live in two villages, Jambur and Sirwan, both Sidi villages. In these two villages, no one can come except Sidi. Here we keep the *nishani* [sign] of Bilal eternal. Sidis may intermarry elsewhere, but not in these two villages.” Proud that the Sidi of Jambur and Sirwan solve their own disputes, Hirbaiben confidently declared, “We will not allow an outsider to interfere in our community. Similarly, Sidi will never get involved in any wider quarrel, such as between Hindus and Muslims.”

Hirbaiben’s stress on autonomy needs to be understood in historical terms. The process of Sidi integration into the wider society was interrupted with Britain’s shift to indirect rule following the 1857 uprising. The effect on the Sidi was that they became both ‘tribalised’ and impoverished. There is a clear difference in how the issue is defined in rural and urban communities. In rural communities, the focus of autonomy is both territorial and institutional: autonomy refers to both village and institutional self-rule.



Sidi girls at a religious school, Jambur, 2005

In urban areas, however, controversy focuses on a single institution: inter-marriage.

Whereas Hirbaiben passionately defended the right of Sidi communities to govern themselves, leaders of the more urban communities, such as Abdul Karim Suban Jaabri, the Chair of the Jamnagar Sidi Jamaat, focused more narrowly on questions such as inter-marriage: “There is no inter-marriage. If our girl marries another, we throw her out of caste. There have been three or four such cases in the last 10 years.” Ebrahim Mohamed of Dhroll concurred: “Those who marry outside the community are expelled from the community. There were four or five cases in Jamnagar in the last 20 years. Everybody is opposed to this.”

Why this strict prohibition, I wondered. Ebrahimbhai said, “If we take girls from outside, who will take our girls? We are all black.” But why should this be a problem if marriage outside the community is an exception and not the rule? Abdulbhai explained, “If we admit one, the husband will bring his family with him. They will gradually take over the community as their children will take advantage of Sidi allocations with government.” Elmas Mubarak Murima Sidi, his English-speaking friend, chimed in: “It will be the end of our community if we indulge in such liberalism.”

It became clear that the prohibition against marriage outside the community was driven more by interest than identity. Our guide, Farida, was the first to narrate the lesson most often cited as a warning. She told us of a Sepoy family with Sidi features which came to the Sidi community in Bhavnagar and pleaded that, unless they are acknowledged as Sidi, they would lose their job. The Sidi Jamaat agreed. Since then, that family and its members have monopolized State job reservations for the Sidi, yet they continue to associate socially with Sepoys—“why we Sidi oppose our people going and marrying outside the community.”

Sidis in Kathiawar became beneficiaries of state affirmative action practices, known in India as ‘reservations’ after late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Jambur Talala. When explained the origins of the Sidi community, he directed that they be classified as Scheduled Tribes [ST], and so they were.



Members of the Janjira royalty: Nawab Sidi Mohamed Reza Khan with his family at home, Sachin, 2009

The counter-example was set by the two brothers, Liaqatbhai and Gafoorbhai of Bhuj, and is often cited as the source of an opposite lesson: for neither brother is typically Sidi-looking but both have served the community diligently. “Liaqatbhai is the chair of the Sidi Jamaat and has done a lot of good for us,” Farida explained. According to Liaqatbhai, the Chair of the Bhuj jamaat: “The fear that you lose your community by marrying outside is groundless. God says that good can come out of bad and bad out of good. You can’t throw anyone out of a *naat* [community] according to the law of the land. This idea is being spread by *jahils*, ignoramuses.”

Clearly, the future of Sidi communities is being shaped by a combination of external and internal influences. The combined effect is clearest in the case of Dhroll where Arab, Sidi and Makrani communities now associate together—even pray and dine together—but marry only among themselves. This cooperation was initiated by a charitable trust endowed by a successful businessman from the Makran community. By building a *jammaat khanna* (a community hall) for the joint use of 42 Arab, Sidi and Makrani households in Dhroll [15 of which are Sidi], the Asim Charitable and Education Trust set in motion processes leading to cooperation and integration between these communities.

The Sidi in Kathaiwar generally consider themselves ‘backward’ in comparison to other Scheduled Tribes [*adivasis*—literally ‘indigenous peoples’]. The big difference, they say, is that the Sidi, unlike the *adivasi*, are not organized. Many trace this lag to a lapse on the part of educated Sidi.

Javedbhai explained, “There are no *badshahs* in politics, in teaching, or in medical service. We don’t know our rights. We are only working for money. Now there is *adivasi samaj* [the society of tribal peoples]. They go around and organize. But we do not.” Farida said there was reason why educated Sidi were alienated from politics: “All educated Sidis are government employees, so they can’t stand in elections.” Yet not all educated Sidis are in government service. Take the example of members of the Janjira royal family that we had met in Mumbai, such as Ahmedi Begum Khan who told us: “I have never met Sidi descended from slaves.”

Is there a common Sidi identity, one based on common African



Janjira Nawab's sister, Ahmedi Begum Khan (left) with her daughter (centre) and sister (right) at home, Mumbai, 2009

descent or a common historical experience? Unlike with people of African descent in the Americas, the Sidi communities of India are not bonded historically by the experience of slavery. To begin with, not all came as slaves; a significant number came as free persons. Furthermore, unlike the slave experience in the capitalist plantations of the Americas, most slaves of the pre-modern world were joined to dynasties and households rather than large-scale commercialized plantations. This made for a highly differentiated experience and a softer slave regime. Not only were African slaves in India—unlike those in the Americas—differentiated between elite and ordinary slaves, the harsh American experience of chattel slavery made for a Jim Crow-type legal discrimination even after abolition. Both facts made for a common black experience in the Americas. The absence of plantation slavery alongside a slave experience that differentiated between elite soldier-administrators and lowly servants goes a long way to explain the assimilation of former Sidi communities in Gujarat. If there was a parallel to Jim Crow-type discrimination in India, it can be traced to the politicisation of caste as community—its introduction in the census and its use for purposes of public policy—during post-1857 indirect rule in British India.

At the same time, one is struck that even the most well-off among free immigrants today acknowledge a common African descent, even if tinged with ambivalence. The last word belongs to Ahmedi Begum Khan: “We know we are from Africa, but I don’t feel African.” She paused, and continued: “But I do have a special feeling for Africa. When Obama became President I felt it. ... Our family came to Bijapur, as administrative officers, army officers. ... I strongly feel that I am Indian. I belong to the Western Coast. I am proud of my great-grandfather. I am very fond of food of Western India, of its *lok sangeet* [folk music]. ...I came hearing of Africa from my childhood. Our grandparents spoke of Africa. I would like to go to North Africa, because of its history, to Egypt, not because of roots.”

Ketaki’s remarkable photographs capture the world of the Sidi with amazing grace. They allow us a privileged view, both intimate and comprehensive, of the beauty and dignity of a people once from Africa but now at home in India.