THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN INDIA

ASSIMILATION, CHANGE AND CULTURAL SURVIVALS

Purnima Mehta Bhatt
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This book explores the understudied and often overlooked subject of African presence in India. It focuses on the so-called Sidis, Siddis or Habshis who occupy a unique place in Indian history. The Sidis comprise scattered communities of people of African descent who travelled and settled along the western coast of India, mainly in Gujarat, but also in Goa, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Sri Lanka and in Sindh (Pakistan) as a result of the Indian Ocean trade from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries.

The work draws from extant scholarly research and documentary sources to provide a comprehensive study of people of African descent in India and sheds new light on their experiences. By employing an interdisciplinary approach across fields of history, art, anthropology, religion, literature and oral history, it provides an analysis of their negotiations with cultural resistance, survivals and collective memory. The author examines how the Sidi communities strived to construct a distinct identity in a new homeland in a polyglot Indian society, their present status, as well as their future prospects.

The book will interest those working in the fields of history, sociology and social anthropology, cultural studies, international relations, and migration and diaspora studies.

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Purnima Mehta Bhatt
For Kiran and Anuradha,
and
My mother, who passed away before the publication of this book.
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In my long journey to complete this book, I have incurred many debts and owe sincere gratitude to many individuals and institutions. Without their support and encouragement, this book would not have been possible.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Dr Ramji Savalia, the Director of the B.J. Institute of Indology and Research in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, who provided invaluable source materials and gave generously of his time and the resources of his Library.

Hood College, where I taught for thirty-nine years, also supported my work with grants and travel funds to complete my fieldwork in India. In Ahmedabad, I was welcomed into the Sidi community of Patthar Kuva, where they provided me with useful information about their lives and their experiences. Smt. Rumanaben, a leader and elder in the community, provided valuable insights into the Sidi community. I am deeply grateful for her friendship and help.

The following museums generously provided images: The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford; The Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the British Library; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The San Diego Museum of Art; The Cleveland Museum of Art; The Los Angeles County Museum; and The Freer and Arthur M. Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Lastly, I wish to thank Dr Joseph E. Harris, who did the pioneering research on the African Diaspora in Asia and published his groundbreaking work on the subject in 1971. Dr Harris was my mentor and dissertation advisor and his research served as an incentive to undertake further research on the topic.
This book examines the African diasporic experience in India. It provides a historical analysis and documentation of the African presence in India. The contacts between Africa and India have deep historical roots, yet the subject remains largely unexplored. The descendants of the Africans continue to be marginalised and overlooked.

The descendants of the Africans who settled in India are referred to as Sidis, Siddis or Habshis. They settled mainly along the west coast of India in Gujarat, Goa, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, as well as in Sri Lanka and in Sindh (Pakistan).¹ Their ancestors came to India as slaves, soldiers, sailors, merchants, crewmen, mercenaries, pearl divers and even concubines. This migration of Africans to India, which may have had its beginnings as early as the first century CE, lasted for nearly 2,000 years. During the medieval period of Indian history, from eight to the eighteenth centuries, a number of Afro-Indians rose to high positions at the courts of the sultans and wielded considerable power. Some became trusted commanders of powerful armies, while others became founders of dynasties. Many of them amassed great wealth gaining prestige and influence in society. These descendants of Africans became both subjects and patrons of art and architecture – commissioning imposing mosques, tombs and other monuments.

My book focuses on the process of adaptation and gradual acculturation that took place over time. It examines the many challenges Sidis encountered, and their efforts to construct new identities while preserving the salient aspects of the cultures of their original homeland.

In many cases, African slaves were transported from the east coast of Africa to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea Ports and from there to India. Many of them converted to Islam, which facilitated their assimilation and absorption into the Indian society. I explore the elements of change, and continuity in African culture, as well as the retention
of collective memory and language in the diasporic community. The book also focuses on cultural survivals in the diasporic community, especially in the realm of religious beliefs and practices, namely in the attitude towards ancestors, belief in spirit possession, veneration of saints and the central role of music and dance in the religious rites and rituals of Africans in India. Accepting the premise that women play a critical role as the upholders of cultural tradition and the transmitters of values and sacred traditions, I examine the lives of the Sidi women to reveal the texture of their lives, the daily rhythms of their existence and their hopes and aspirations for their children. The book concludes with a discussion of the current status of the Sidis and the prospects for the future.

Significance and relevance of this book

Starting with the sixteenth century, the world witnessed the large-scale movement of people from the African continent, across the Atlantic to the New World. This forced migration, popularly known as the Atlantic slave trade has been the subject of numerous scholarly works and monographs. The nineteenth century also witnessed the migration of large numbers of indentured labour to various parts of the world. With the decline and abolition of the slave trade, indentured workers were recruited to work in the plantations of the Caribbean – Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Fiji and Mauritius. Indians also voluntarily migrated to East and Southern Africa (notably Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa) to work on the plantations, railways, mining and other industries. These diasporic communities have been studied and researched extensively. Despite this interest in migration and diaspora, very little is known about the movements of African people from the African continent to the Persian Gulf, Red Sea regions and across the Indian Ocean to India and China. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the necessity to examine and better comprehend the movements of Africans to Asia and the Middle East. Professor Joseph E. Harris undertook the pioneering work in this field in the 1970s. Since then a number of scholars have begun to recognise the need to explore this fascinating field of study.

I hope this book will make a useful contribution to the field of diasporic studies and fill a significant void by providing a better understanding of the African presence in India.

My background and academic training has enabled me to work on this project. I completed my undergraduate and graduate degrees in
Indian History and have a doctorate in African history. My doctoral dissertation focused on the migration of Indians to East Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so this book completes the circle by examining the Africans in India. I have taught African and Asian History in the United States for nearly four decades. I am originally from Gujarat where most of the Sidis can be found today. Thus, I bring to this book language skills and a cultural understanding of the region.

Notes

1 While the book includes a discussion of the Sidis in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Sindh (Pakistan), Sri Lanka and the Maldives Islands, much of the fieldwork for this book was undertaken in the state of Gujarat.

2 Joseph Harris is Professor (Emeritus) of African history at Howard University in Washington D.C. and the author of several books including The Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora and Africans and Their History (1994).
The Sidis comprise of small and scattered communities of people of African descent, along the western coast of India, in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, as well as in Sindh (Pakistan), Sri Lanka and the Maldives Islands. Their ancestors may have arrived in India as slaves, mercenaries or may have been sailors who opted to remain and settle in India voluntarily. These descendants of Africans provide interesting and valuable materials for scholarly investigation and study on the largely unexplored field of the African presence in India.\(^1\) The culture of the Sidis in Western India also sheds light on the interplay between the forces of continuity and change in the cultures of immigrants and displaced people.

In Gujarat, the descendants of African slaves or sailors are referred to in popular usage as Habshi or Sidis. The term Habshi is used in Arabic and Persian dictionary for those belonging to Abyssinia or Ethiopia, while Sidi comes from the word saidi and refers to the learned.\(^2\) In Pakistan, they are referred to as shidi, while in Sri Lanka they are called kafirs. African slaves were referred to as habashi-kaffirs. It was a derogatory term, and over time was replaced by the term Sidi, a more dignified appellation, derived from the word shyed, saidi or shyd, which became a title. Over time, this too underwent change, and in Saurashtra, the term used was Sidi badshah which denotes their past association with the royal kingdoms and their rulers. The adoption of the term badshah by the Sidis may also represent an effort on their part to counter the negative connotations of the word Habshi used often to refer to the descendants of Africans. The Arab writings refer to the descendants of Africans as Zanjis meaning from Zanzibar, while the Chinese transcribed the word as Xinji or Jinzhi. During the medieval period of Indian history some of them occupied high positions at courts and wielded considerable power. They also accumulated wealth, thereby, gaining prestige and influence in society.
It should be stressed that not all of the descendants of Africans can be traced back to slave origins. They came to India over many centuries and in different historical contexts. While many of them may have come as slaves, others came as sailors, soldiers, mercenaries, merchants, eunuchs, concubines and pearl divers and some served in the courts of the princely rulers. In Gujarat, the Sidis settled in Saurashtra, Kutch and south Gujarat in Diu, Jafрабad, Mangrol, Jamnagar, Veraval, Porbandar, Khabhhat, Surat, Broach and in Janjira in Maharashtra. Sidi communities can be found in Jambur and Talala near Junagadh and Murud, the capital of Janjira (from the Arabic word جزيرة meaning island).

Even as slaves, their dignity as human beings was often maintained by the princely states. This was particularly the case in Saurashtra and the Deccan. Some of the descendants of the so-called Habshis rose from slavery to positions of power and achieved considerable fame and wealth. Some commanded vast armies and amassed great wealth. The names of many of these are found in the annals of Indian history.

There is no clear consensus among scholars regarding the number of Sidis in India. These estimates vary from 250,000 according to Lodhi (1992:83) to as low as 5,000 (Patel 1986:238). Based on government statistics, Micklem estimated that in the year 2000, the Sidi population of Gujarat was 10,000 (Micklem 2001:25). Sidis comprise 0.01 per cent of the 60 million inhabitants of Gujarat (Shodhan 2015:3). These estimates, however, vary. Camara (1997) for example estimates the Sidi population at 35,000. In addition to Western India, Sidis are also settled in Karnataka, mostly in the districts of Yellapur, Mundgod and Hubli. Obeng estimates that there are about 14,000 African Indians in Karnataka, the majority of whom are agriculture labourers and gatherers of areca nuts (Obeng 2003:99). Sidi populations are also found in Sindh (Pakistan), Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and in Sri Lanka, where they are mainly concentrated in the coastal regions of Batticaloa, Negombo and Trincomalee.

**Physical appearances**

The physical appearance or the physiognomy of the Sidis resembles that of diverse African ethnic groups residing on the continent of Africa. They tend generally to have dark skin colour ranging from brown to black with woolly hair, thick full lips, broad flat noses and robust build. They have a reputation for being courageous, energetic, hard-working, strong and loyal. The Sidis in India are said to belong to a mixed racial stock comprising Negroid, Australoid and Caucasoid
stocks. It is obvious that their racial origins can only be fully understood by studying their physical characteristics and genetic make-up.

The Sidis like the Bantus of the African continent are less prone to contracting malaria, because of the genetic inheritance from Africa. A recent study carried out by The Centre for Cellular Biology in Hyderabad suggests a link between the Bantu populations in Central and East Africa and the Sidis of Gujarat and Karnataka (Times of India, Ahmedabad, 19 July 2011). Scientists who compared the Sidi population of South India with seven indigenous tribal groups of Southern India found that the Sidis are genetically closer to the Africans than to the populations of South India (Gauniyal et al. 2008:251). Another research study on the genetic make-up of the Sidi population and a genome-wide survey carried out by scientists, published in the American Journal of Human Genetics (2011:154–161) indicates that the Sidis share genetic traits with African, Indian and Portuguese populations. Recent genome-wide studies carried out to better understand their genetic inheritance suggest that Sidis have on average 67 per cent African ancestry (Shah et al. 2011:3). Future DNA studies could provide further substantiation and possibly yield important genetic information.

Language

The continent of Africa is characterised by an astonishing variety of languages estimated to be over 1,300, and since the Sidis came from different regions of the continent, the dialects spoken by them reflect this variety. These languages and dialects result from the assimilation and interactions of various ethnic groups and include the Semitic (Arabic and Ethiopian), Hamito-Semitic (Egyptian, Cushitic, Somali, Swahili) and the Bantu languages. However, Swahili which incorporates Bantu, Arabic, Persian and Indian words became the common language of the coastal populations of East Africa.

The original language of the Sidis of Gujarat was derived from Swahili, Somali, and the Sudanese family of languages; however, their dialects reflect regional influences. Sidis residing in the coastal areas of Kutch and Northern Saurashtra mostly speak Kutchi languages whereas Sidis in Saurashtra speak Kathiawadi (Saurashtrian) dialects of Gujarati. The Sidis residing in the vicinity of Jambur are referred to as Shimali (possibly from the term Somalia) and speak Gujarati; those from other parts of Saurashtra are known as Tais and their dialect tends to incorporate Gujarati and Hindi words, while the descendants of Africans in Diu known as Swahilis use many words from the
Swahili language of the East African Coast (Patel 1986:239). As noted earlier, the Sidis came to India from various parts of Africa and consequently, the languages they speak contain words from numerous African languages. Burton was the first to identify the language of the Sidis of Sindh (Burton 1851:253–257). According to him, most of the Africans in Sindh were unfamiliar with their native languages and the few words that they used were borrowed from their parents (Ibid. 4). Burton had prepared a list of languages in 1851 according to which the dialect spoken in the coastal areas of Sindh and Kutch contained a total of 122 words from Shambaa, Jigua, Gindo and Yarvo, all Bantu languages. Commenting on the different types of African slaves in Sindh, Burton makes a distinction between those who were born slaves and others who were brought from Muscat and the Arabian coast. According to Freeman-Grenville (1988:18), the Sidi language spoken in Sindh and Kutch in the mid-nineteenth century contained words from their tribal homelands, especially in Tanzania (Shambaa, Yao and Zigua) and linguistic borrowings from Mozambique (from Makua, Nyanja and Yao). He identified numerous words such as nyumba (house), mukoki (spear) and Khundoro (sheep). In Sindh, the word for shield is gao, which is derived from the Swahili word ngao, while the Afro-Sindhi term for the moon is moesi, which is similar to the Swahili word mwesi. Elders in Sindh used terms such as makoti (bread), magena (money) and others often without knowing their source. Other Swahili words found in the language spoken by the Sidis include sokoni (kitchen), pasi (iron), funiko (lid), fagiyo (broom), mashamba (farm), mzee (elder), hodi (greeting), karibu (welcome) and jambo sana (very well) (Mamdani, ‘Sidi: An Introduction’ in Sheth, A Certain Grace, The Sidi: Indians of African Descent, 2013). However, fieldwork by Lodhi among the Sidi populations in Gujarat yielded only a dozen Bantu/Swahili single word items, a dozen or so phrases and a small number of complete Swahili sentences (Lodhi 2006).

Thus, it is obvious from the above discussion that the languages and dialects spoken by the Sidis in South Asia represent great diversity and considerable borrowing from the local languages.

Notes

1 The earliest mention of African settlements in India is found in 1926 in the writings of T.H Esquire. See A Relation of Some Years Travaile Begunne Anno 1926 into Afrique and the Greater Asia, London: Newberry Library, 1934.
3 Two villages, Jambur and Shirvan are 100 per cent Sidi. Jambur, situated in the vicinity of Gir forest between the rivers Saraswati and Karkari has a population of an estimated 500 Sidis.
4 The term Swahili is a corrupt form from of the Arabic term swali, meaning coastal lands.
It is now generally accepted that the continent of Africa is the birthplace and cradle land of all human beings – the mother of humankind. It is on this continent that hominids – the direct ancestors of present-day Homo sapiens first emerged. From this continent the Homo sapiens gradually dispersed to different parts of the world. In historic times, the early inhabitants of the land of India were fully aware of the existence of the African continent, which was referred to as Kala Khand or the Dark Continent. In Gujarat, Africa was known as Andrheri Khand, the term andheri also suggestive of darkness or that which is not known. While the origins of coastal trade between East Africa and the west coast of India go back to antiquity, little was known about the interior of Africa until the sixteenth century. The lack of knowledge about the hinterland was due primarily to the presence of malaria, yellow fever and other diseases that served as deterrents to the penetration and exploration of the interior.

On the basis of the archaeological findings at various sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation (ca. 2500–1500 BCE), one can surmise that there existed an active and flourishing maritime trade between India and the African continent. The discovery of extensive dockyards at Lothal in Gujarat and other newly excavated sites such as Dholavira attest to this contact between the west coast of India, the east coast of Africa and the ancient Near East. Figure 2.1 provides a broad view of this geographic area surrounding the Indian Ocean. The evidence suggests that merchants from Gujarat must have undertaken sea voyages on the Indian Ocean in antiquity. The clay seals excavated at Ur in ancient Mesopotamia provide further evidence of the organisation of this trade.

By the second half of the third millennium BCE, ‘there is concrete evidence of a network of trade linking up the Tigris to the Indus
and the Oxus and its extension west of the Euphrates as far as the Nile’ (Saxena 1965:201). This Indian Ocean trade involved movement of goods as well as people. Terracotta models of ships found in excavations at Indus sites lead archaeologists to believe that the residents of Lothal, in Western India, possessed the technical skills
and knowledge to construct ships, which were seaworthy. Seals bearing motifs and script commonly found in the Indus Civilisation have been found at Kish, Ur, Ras-al-Qala and other Sumerian cities (Mehta 2009:8). Recent archaeological excavations carried out since 1982 at Rojdi in central Gujarat have revealed the remains of domesticated grains like finger millet and sorghum (ca. 2500–2000 BCE) that originated in Africa (Weber 1991:109–111). These findings are significant in pointing out the integration and adoption of African millet into the Indian agricultural system (Possehl and Raval 1990:108–113). Other excavations at the site of Nagawada on the banks of the Rupen River in North Gujarat in Kuntasi village suggest that Gujarat was an integral part of the Indian Ocean trade long before the Christian era.

The Sidis came from Africa and their original homelands were Ethiopia (Abyssinia), Somalia, Sudan, Zanzibar, and to a lesser extent Egypt, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Zambia and Mozambique. Since many of the Sidis who settled in India came from Africa via the Gulf States, their memories of the original homelands have mostly been forgotten. The following is a brief description of the ancient kingdoms that may provide useful insights about cultural interactions and borrowings between India and the African continent in antiquity.

The Egyptian civilisation ranks as one of the oldest in human history dating back to more than 5,000 years. The dynastic period in Egypt commenced in 3100 BCE with the unification of the two lands of Upper and Lower Egypt under the Pharaoh Menes, known as Menander in Greek sources. The civilisation flourished for more than 3,000 years until its conquest by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, after which it became a part of the Roman Empire. The land of Egypt occupied a strategic position on the Mediterranean coast and served as a gateway to Africa and India. There is some evidence to suggest that ancient Egypt may have had trading relations with India in antiquity. During the period known as the New Kingdom, ca. 1552–1069 BCE, the Egyptians imported lapis lazuli and sandalwood from India. In the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt, there is a mention of the Khebsi to describe the inhabitants of Punt or ancient Ethiopia (Segrew Hable Selassie 1972:21). It is possible that the term Khebsi is related to the word Habshi. If that assumption is correct, the term Habshi is ancient Egyptian and not Arabic. Eventually, after the fall of the Roman Empire, Egypt was overrun by the Arabs who dominated North Africa and spread the religion of Islam to the region lying to the South.
Ethiopia (formerly known as Abyssinia) was known as Axum in the ancient world. According to legend it was founded by Menelik, the son of the legendary Queen Sheba of Ethiopia and King Solomon of Israel. The imperial dynasty of rulers who ruled Ethiopia traced their descent from King Menelik. When the Greeks conquered Egypt, they traded with Axum and by the fourth century CE, Axum was a Christian kingdom with magnificent churches carved out of rock. In the seventh century CE, Arab armies overran most of North Africa and converted the populations to Islam, however, the Ethiopians managed to carry on their Coptic beliefs and practices until 1541 CE when a Muslim army conquered Ethiopia. As early as the sixteenth century, there are accounts, which mention trade between India and Ethiopia comprising of silks and textiles from India in exchange for Ethiopian gold, ivory and slaves (Beckingham and Huntingford 1954:162). Some scholars have suggested possible cultural relations between Ethiopia and the Muslim kingdom of Khandesh in the Deccan. 1 It is well documented that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a fairly large number of slaves were brought into the Muslim kingdom of Khandesh. As pointed out by Beckingham, there are noticeable similarities in certain customs that suggest borrowings from Ethiopian polity due to the presence of this slave population. This includes the practice of imprisoning male members of the ruling family in a closely guarded mountain fortress to prevent the possibility of civil war or a challenge to the power of the ruler (Beckingham 1957:182). In the late nineteenth century, when the rest of the African continent was colonised by the European powers, Ethiopia once again managed to retain her independence. In 1860, the Ethiopians inflicted a crushing defeat on the Italian army at Adowa. In 1963, the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, was chosen as the headquarters of the newly formed Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

Situated in Northeast Africa along the Red Sea coastline, Sudan shares a common boundary with Ethiopia in the East and with various countries in Central Africa. Its origins go back to antiquity. During the time of the Egyptian civilisation, the land of Upper Egypt was known as Nubia or the ‘land of the blacks’. Between 1500 and 1200 BCE, Nubia or Sudan was ruled by Egyptian pharaohs; but existed as an independent kingdom from 750 BCE to 350 CE. In the seventh century CE, Muslim invaders replaced Christianity with the religion of Islam.

Located in the horn of Africa, Somalia also has a long history and involvement in the Indian Ocean trade. The Somalis were traditionally nomadic tribes who were proud people with a turbulent history.
Sailing and seafaring activities in antiquity

The origins of sailing and seafaring activities go back thousands of years. This was inevitable as populations residing in coastal areas and with access to the ocean devised various means to navigate the waters. Rafts and hollowed-out trunks of trees (kayaks) were used on rivers and lakes while sturdier vessels were made for sea voyages. Archaeological findings and tomb paintings from the Old Kingdom in ancient Egypt testify to the fact that as early as 4000–3000 BCE, the Egyptians were utilising boats to travel and trade along the Nile River. A flourishing trade existed between Egypt, India and West Asia. Recent evidence from the archaeological discoveries along the Indus River provides evidence of the maritime activities during the period of the Indus Valley Civilisation (ca. 2500–1500 BCE). The findings of a major dockyard at Lothal in Gujarat suggest that large ocean-going ships were used at Lothal (Rao 1985). During the course of archaeological excavations at Lothal, terracotta models of an African gorilla were also found, providing further evidence of contacts between India and Africa (Ibid. 16).

By the seventh and eighth centuries BCE, the Phoenicians as well as the Greeks were active in the Indian Ocean trade, which consisted of gold, ivory, textiles, beads and spices etc. Ethnobotanical evidence suggests that India borrowed millet (known as ragi) and the baobab tree from the African continent. Long before the Europeans entered the Indian Ocean trade, there existed a flourishing maritime trade between the continent of Africa and India. This is further attested by the discovery of coins from the kingdom of Axum in Southern India, which are dated from the first century to the seventh century CE.

There are references in ancient Indian texts to sailors and seafaring vessels. The Rig Veda mentions ratha (chariot) and anas (cart) used for land trade and nav (or boat for seafaring voyages) while the Ramayana contains a reference to kevat (or, sailors) helping Lord Rama cross the river. Epic literature especially the Mahabharata makes references to Dwarka as a gateway for seafaring trade. According to legend, one of the sons of Lord Krishna had married a daughter of the royal family of Egypt. The Mahabharata also contains a reference to the destruction of a ship. Buddhist texts in Pali also contain references to sea voyages and trade with distant lands.

From very early times, the sailors from the East African coastal areas and those from the west coast of India were trading with one another. There are numerous references to this in the writings of Greek and Roman writers such as Arrian and Strabo. In their writings
there is a mention of two sites in East Africa – Ras Hafun in Somalia and Chibuene in Mozambique. This is evidence of the existence of the Indian Ocean trade in antiquity (Chauhan 1995:13). Strabo makes a mention of Sigerdis (possibly Sagardvipa in Kutch) and Saraoostus, which almost certainly is a reference to modern-day Saurashtra (Strabo, The Geography of Strabo edited by Horace Leonard Jones, London, 1917). Ancient records also refer to a trading expedition, as early as 636 CE from the Persian Gulf to Thane on the west coast of India, near Mumbai.

During the Mauryan Age (ca. 320 BCE–185 BCE), as described by the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, the royal shipyard was built for seagoing vessels. According to the accounts, when the Greek and Roman influence on the west coast of India was at its height between second century BCE and third century CE, Roman gold poured into India as payment for her silk and spices. Ibn Battuta makes a reference to the flourishing trade between Africa and India and in his writings comments on the visible role of Indian merchants in the Indian Ocean ports. Referring to Aden, Battuta wrote ‘It is the port of the Indians, and to it come large vessels from Kinbayat (Cambay), Kawlam (Quilon), Calicut and many other Indian ports. There are Indian merchants living there’ (Battuta 1929:110).

The fifteenth century marked the advent of the European age of exploration and sea voyages were undertaken to discover new lands and to promote trade and proselytisation. Foremost among the European powers in this endeavour were the Portuguese who under the leadership of their ruler Prince Henry the Navigator took keen interest in shipbuilding and navigation. Portuguese ships sailed along the Atlantic to explore the west coast of Africa and built forts along the coast to protect their trade. Soon after, followed the Spaniards, Dutch, English and the French sailors. While the European powers were establishing settlements and trade along the western coast of Africa, the Arab traders were actively engaged in trade along the east coast of Africa and also as far as the Indian Ocean. They have also married local women.

**Ancestors of Sidis as sailors**

The Indian Ocean trade predates the Atlantic slave trade by centuries. While the Arabs enjoyed near monopoly of the trade for centuries, coastal Africans and west coast Indians also plied these waters. Africans residing in the many coastal regions were active in this trade. They were skilled sailors and navigators who had established
commercial relations with the coastal regions of India especially Malabar and the Coromandel Coast. The Indian and African sailors were skilled at navigation and possessed vast knowledge of the oceans and the movement of the stars to guide them in their voyages. They also used seabirds to guide them to land. The southwest monsoon winds enabled the Indians to traverse the Indian Ocean and carry on trade with the east coast of Africa. They used dhows, an Arabic word for the traditional sailing vessels, also referred to as buglas or buggalows to travel across the ocean. They carried minimum provisions to sustain themselves which included rice, dates, a grain locally known as m’tama, dried fish, coconuts and coffee (Colomb 1873:40). It was a sailor from Kutch, India by the name of Kanji Malam – who is said to have shown Vasco da Gama the route from Malindi to Calicut. The ancestors of the Sidis may have played a significant role as sailors and it is very probable that some of these Africans who sailed to India remained there to establish settlements and trading colonies along the west coast of India. They may also have married local women, thereby, creating more permanent ties to India.

Thus, it is evident from the available records that the subcontinent of India and the African continent were linked through trade and travel for over a millennia and consequently, there were long-standing cultural influences and exchanges between the two regions.

Note
The institution of slavery dates back to time immemorial. Slavery in one form or the other has existed since the dawn of human history. It is difficult to provide actual evidence for the existence of slavery in prehistoric times due to the absence of written documentary evidence and archaeological findings. However, ancient myths, especially comparative mythology provide tantalising insights. One could speculate that in early hunting and gathering societies, primitive warriors may have killed their enemies or taken them as captives. Clear evidence for the existence of slavery is available from the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, China and others. This body of evidence is both written as well as archaeological. Slaves were obtained in these civilisations not only from captives taken in war, but also as a result of indebtedness and poverty. In the course of time, slavery had become an established institution.

Ancient Indian texts also make references to the presence of slavery in India. The term used is Dasatva and Dasa-Dasi system. There are references in the Rig Veda1 to the dark-skinned dasyus, possibly a reference to the indigenous population of the Indus Valley Civilisation who were defeated and subsequently enslaved by the Aryan or Indo-European invaders. There are also references to slaves in the epic Ramayana. This institution of slavery, however, differs markedly from slavery practiced in the New World from the sixteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. The former mainly consisted of domestic slaves who were often seen as extensions of the family. Support for this is found in the writings of the Greeks during the invasion of India by Alexander who did not find slave soldiers in the armies of his adversary, the Indian King Paurus.

Other forms of slavery

Thus, it is evident from the historical records that slavery was a well-established institution in India, the origins of which go back to early
times. It was also recognised and sanctioned by both Hindu and Muslim laws. In India, slave labour was abundant and easily available due to the hierarchical structure of the society. Domestic slavery was widespread and existed throughout the land. There had existed from time immemorial predial slavery, which referred to agricultural slaves. Many of the latter became bonded labourers as a result of their inability to pay taxes. Hindu law identified and classified many different kinds of slaves. One could become a slave through capture in war or by birth, indebtedness, purchase, inheritance and gambling or voluntary surrender during famine as well as desertion. This type of slavery existed in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala and south Gujarat. Most slaves were employed as domestic servants, but were subject to sale. This system of bonded labour was known as Bandhia Mazdur and in south Gujarat, it was known as Hali-Halpati or Dubala.

The African slaves in India on the other hand, constituted numerically a small number of the total population of slaves and were sought out primarily for their prestige value and their loyalty. They were mainly used as status symbols.

The Indian Ocean slave trade

The transportation of slaves from the east coast of Africa to Asia and the Mediterranean predates the Atlantic slave trade by more than 1,000 years. The earliest recorded reference to the trade between the east coast of Africa and Western India comes from the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, a first-century CE account of an Alexandrian sailor. It describes the extensive trade along the Indian Ocean, the various ports of call and the types of merchandise exchanged in this trade. This reference to the trade in itself was nothing extraordinary, for as early as Egypt’s Queen Hatshepsut (ca. 1479–1459 BCE), there is archaeological evidence of expeditions to the land of Punt. Historians surmise that an active trade had developed across the Indian Ocean, which involved the Mediterranean, Arabia, Persia, India, the islands of the Indonesian archipelago and China.

The *Periplus* is unique because it is the earliest surviving testimony and first-hand account of the East African coast and the trade along the Indian Ocean. The link between India and the African continent in antiquity is further borne by the discovery of coins from the ancient kingdom of Axum (present-day Ethiopia) from the fourth century CE found in Mangalore in Southern India. This is indicative of trade relations and seafaring activity between India and Ethiopia (Jayasuriya 2003:3). After the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century
CE, this trade became the monopoly of Arab and Persian traders.\(^2\) The exports from Africa to India included ivory, gold, slaves, leopard skins, rhinoceros horns and tortoise shells.

The exact nature of this relationship between the Arab traders and the indigenous inhabitants of the East African coast, called the land of the Zanj is not clear (July 1998:81–82). The ancient chroniclers mention the Arab settlements and claim that the local population had converted to Islam in the seventh century CE. However, most scholars including July assert that this allegiance to Islam took place as late as the thirteenth century and coincided with the establishment of Muslim states in India, Persia and Indonesia (Ibid. 82).

The Atlantic slave trade has received much greater attention from scholars, in contrast to the East African slave trade in Asia and the Middle East. The latter, however spanned a much longer period and was in existence until the 1900s, over 1,000 years. Moreover, according to recent scholarship, the total number of slaves exported to the New World along the Atlantic Ocean in approximately four centuries was about twelve and a half million which was about the same number as that sent to Asia, the Persian Gulf and Red Sea regions\(^3\) (Collins 2006:325). Collins also points out that the real difference between the two is the time span of the trade; the export of slaves across the Atlantic took place over four centuries while the Indian Ocean trade lasted for 1,000 years.

The impact of the trade on Africa was, therefore, far more intense and traumatic in the case of the Atlantic slave trade and the disruption caused to the society was significantly greater in comparison to the Indian Ocean slave trade. Collins estimates that the volume of the Asian slave trade between the years 1600 and 1900 CE, for which there is reliable evidence, was about five and a half million slaves (Collins 2006:327). It is estimated that approximately twelve and a half million slaves were exported across the Sahara, Red Sea, East Africa and the Indian Ocean between 800 and 1900 CE.\(^4\) These data indicate that while an estimated twelve million slaves may have been transported during the entire duration of the Indian Ocean trade, the period 1600–1900 CE saw its culmination.

**Slavery in the nineteenth century**

The official documents of the Bombay Presidency provide useful information on the importation of slaves into Western India. These records refer to the slaves imported in Arab vessels into the native states of Kutch, Kathiawar, Sindh, Bombay and the Portuguese ports of Goa,
Diu and Daman. Willoughby, the political agent at Kathiawar in a Memorandum states that his attention was drawn to this when he observed ‘African boys in attendance upon the Native Chiefs who visited Rajkot’. These slaves were imported from Muscat, Mozambique, Malacca, Bucca, Jeddah, Macula, Sohal and other places.

There appeared to be considerable demand for African slaves in India and slave traders had no difficulty in selling off their human cargo. In mid-nineteenth century, the subjects of the sultans of Muscat and Zanzibar brought African slaves to sell in Bombay. While Bombay was the headquarters of Her Majesty’s anti-slavery patrols, only a small number of dhows carrying slaves were intercepted. Often times, the crew members of these dhows were themselves slaves; however, it was impossible to determine if the seamen were part of the crew or slaves (Colomb 1873:97). The slave trade continued to flourish because of its enormous profitability. In 1844, the price of African slave boys up to ten years of age ranged from seven to fifteen dollars while those from ten to twenty years of age could fetch fifteen to thirty dollars (Ibid. 56). Thus, it is clear that ‘The margin of profit as between the price of slave bought in East Africa at from six to twelve dollars, the price of slave sold in the market of Asia at about sixty to a hundred or two hundred dollars, is so great that it is worth the while of the dealer to run almost any risk’ (Colonel Kelly quoted in Colomb 1873:58). In a letter dated 16 January 1836 the senior magistrate of the police wrote: ‘African children are so valuable in Bombay that I have been afraid to let them go about, lest they should be stolen’ (Letter from the Senior Magistrate of Police to the Political Secretary of the Government of Bombay, dated 16 January 1836 in Great Britain Foreign Office, 1838:129).

Private individuals as well as Christian families were clamouring to acquire the African slaves as evidenced from the applications submitted to obtain these slaves. In one reference, Christian families in Bombay applied for sixty-one slaves (Ibid. 4). This trade in slaves was subject to little or no control or restraint from the Government of Bombay and slaves were bought both for domestic service as well as to serve as concubines. The situation was not very different in Calcutta. Writing in the Calcutta Journal on 1 November 1823, Mr. Arnot wrote, ‘This great capital is . . . . at once the depot of the commerce and riches of the East and the mart in which the manacled African is sold like the beast of the field to the highest bidder’ (quoted in Banaji 1932:5). The Arab ships imported not just African men and women but 150 eunuchs as well, who served in the royal courts and were greatly prized for their loyalty.
Contrary to the claims of fair and humane treatment, evidence points to the brutal and savage treatment of the slaves. Records suggest that ‘of the 200 African boys, emasculated in India, only ten survived the cruel operations’ (Ibid.). As early as the late eighteenth century, advertisements in journals and newspapers provide information on the savage trafficking of humans. Banaji’s study of slavery in India cites some of these:

Wanted – Two Coffrees (Kaffirs?) who can play on the French horn, and are otherwise hardy and useful about a house relative to the business of consumee (Khansamah), or that of a cook.

Another advertisement pertains to a gentleman seeking ‘two very handsome African ladies of the true sable hue between the ages of 14 and 25 for sexual services’. Yet another advertisement stated, ‘To be sold by private sale – two Coffree boys, . . . about 18 years of age, belonging to a Portuguese Padre lately deceased. For particulars enquire of the Vicar of the Portuguese Church’ (Banaji 1932:7). This indicates that not just private individuals, but even the Catholic clergy owned African slaves. Moreover, African females were openly sought out for sexual purposes.

Advertisements relating to the sale and purchase of slaves in the market included such items as:

Gold and silver
Four Cafres by the names of Ventura, Joze, Passarinho and Furtuno
One negress named Junevita
Four pigs with ten sucklings

(quoted in Pescatello 1977:47)

Interesting in this list is the lumping together of slaves with pigs and gold and silver indicative of the fact that slaves were viewed as merchandise and valued for their economic worth.

The unpublished records from the Political Department (Vol. IV, Bombay Record Department) provide a graphic description of the display and purchase of slaves. According to these, children of six years of age fetched five or six dollars while the worth of a prime slave was about fifty rupees. Young girls were sold for as much as sixty rupees, suggesting that female slaves were in greater demand, probably for their reproductive value. According to these estimates as many as 10,000 slaves were sent annually from Zanzibar to India (Banaji 1932:25).
In 1863 the Census Act XI was passed which showed that by that time, the population of Bombay had increased significantly. However, according to the records in 1872, of a total population of 644,405 in Bombay, the so-called ‘Negro-Africans’ numbered 1,171 or a mere 18 per cent. By 1881, their numbers had declined to 689. By 1891, when the fourth official census was carried out, the Negro Africans were not even counted as a separate category, possibly subsumed under Musalmans6 or ‘others’ (Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island, Vol. 1 edited by S.M. Edwards 2001:164–165).

The Gazetteer also mentions the rituals and religious practices of the Muslims. It goes on to state that the opium clubs of the city consist of patrons from different classes, which include Sikh embroiderers from Lahore, Mughals from Persia, tea shop owners, hawkers, Marathas, native Christians and men from Gujarat along with ‘the Sidis from Zanzibar’ (Gazetteer, Ibid. 191). This suggests that Sidis or Negro Africans were among the impoverished and marginalised population of the city, who found escape in opium and other nefarious activities.

The Portuguese participation in the slave trade

As early as the fifteenth century, the Portuguese were importing slaves into India from Mozambique and Zanzibar. These slaves were mainly found in the Portuguese territories of Goa, Diu and Daman on the west coast of India. African slaves brought to Daman were generally used locally, but those imported into Diu were sent to Kathiawar and other regions in northwest India where they were employed as domestic labour or for their prestige value by the local rulers (Machado 2003:19). In Diu the slaves were utilised as crew and deckhands on the ships. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the number of slaves imported into Portuguese territories in India from Mozambique was relatively small, possibly a few thousand. This was to increase significantly by the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was estimated to have increased to over 6,000 (Bauss 1997:23).

Slavery was an integral part of the Portuguese fidalgos (noblemen or those belonging to the aristocracy) in Gujarat province. These slaves were mainly imported from the Portuguese colonies in Africa and primarily used as domestic slaves. There is a reference to the cruel treatment of slaves in the Voyage of Pyrard de Laval, and other travellers. These accounts describe the slave auctions in Goa and other Portuguese territories. According to them, both men and women were stripped naked on the auction block on the Rue Direita in Goa to
better display them. Branding of slaves was also a common practice (Pinto 1992:101). This led to a strong rebuke from the king of Portugal who stated:

To all to whom this my Order shall come, I, the King, give you to understand that I am informed that in the city of Goa, and in other cities, fortresses, and palaces in the parts of India, the captive slaves are chastised by their masters with much rigor, being put to severe and painful torture by cruel and exquisite means, whereby many die in the said torture, or afterwards die thereof, and that to conceal the evil so done, the masters bury them in their houses and gardens, whereby great scandal results, etc.? (Pyrard de Laval 1887: xxix)

Linschoten, an early Dutch traveller in the course of his travels encountered African slaves in India and stated ‘there are many of them in India that are slaves and captives, both men and women which are brought (hither) out of Aetheopia . . .’ (Linschoten 1874:70–71). He observed that even convents and monasteries owned slaves and employed them to perform various jobs. Linschoten goes on to state that many of these slaves came from Mozambique and were sold for two or three ducats (Ibid. 275).

The Indian Ocean trade and the role of the Indian merchants

Indian traders, especially from Kutch, Kathiawar, Surat, Cambay and Porbandar played an active role in the Indian Ocean slave trade from the late fifteenth century to the nineteenth century. Prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, the trade between the East African coast and India consisted mainly of gold and ivory from Africa and cotton cloth and glass beads from India. Mention is made of Indian traders as early as the writings of Ibn Battuta who refers to the Indian merchants living in Aden, where ships came from Kinbayat (Cambay), Kawlam and Calicut (Battuta 1986:110). In early sixteenth century Cambay was the most important entry port of international trade in Western India, later replaced by Diu. The earliest references to Gujarati traders in East Africa are provided by the Portuguese accounts. According to one of them, in the year 1500 the Portuguese fleet encountered three vessels from Cambay in Malindi on the East African Coast (Alpers 1976:30).
Duarte Barbosa (ca.1480–1521) was appointed in the service of the Portuguese government and travelled to India from 1500 to 1515. On his return to Portugal, he published an account of his visit. In it he referred to this extensive trade and wrote: ‘Ships also sail hence to Mecca, Aden, Zeila, Barbara, Magadaxo, Melinde, Brava, Mombaca, and Ormuz with the Kingdom thereof’ (The Book of Duarte Barbosa 1918:129–130).

According to Alpers, a small community of merchants referred to in India as *vanias* lived and settled in Mombasa as early as the seventeenth century on a narrow street which is known as Ndia Kuu today (Alpers 1976:36). The Gujarati merchants had established a well-structured and complex commercial organisation, particularly in the form of *mahajans* (similar to guilds), which were an occupational group or sub-caste (*jati*).

Gujarat continued to dominate the trade of East Africa throughout the seventeenth century and in return for its cloth, it imported numerous East African products such as slaves, ivory and gold. Muscat also played an important role in the Indian Ocean trade and the Indian merchants had a strong presence there. Costan Nebuhar, a Danish merchant testifies to this when he wrote in 1765 that ‘in no other Mahometan city are the Banians so numerous as in Muskat; their numbers in the city amounts to no fewer than twelve hundred. They are permitted to live agreeably to their own laws, to bring their wives hither, to set up idols in their chambers and to bury their dead’ (quoted in Allen’s ‘Sayyids, Shets and Sultans: Politics and Trade in Masqat under the Al Bu Said, 1785–1914’, 1978:100–103). The Gujarati ‘vanias’ or merchants played a leading role in Mozambique and in the mid-eighteenth century, the Indian community of Mozambique numbered more than 200, surpassing the population of Portuguese settlers (Alpers 1976:40). Not only were these Gujarati merchants prosperous with substantial holdings, but also they must certainly have owned African slaves, some of whom may have eventually found their way to Gujarat. Of the more than 200 Gujarati merchants, the majority were men without their families and many were slave owners, with one Fattechande Getta said to have owned 76 slaves (Francisco Santana, quoted in Alpers 1976:41).

It is evident from these accounts that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the vanias or Gujarati merchants of Diu more or less held a monopoly over the trade with Mozambique and the Swahili coast. They frequently worked with the Portuguese as partners in the profitable slave trade. Among the Gujarati merchants most actively involved in this trade in the late eighteenth century, mention is made of
one Laxmichand Motichand and Shobhachand Sowchand. They along with other merchants like Amirchand Meghaji were among the largest slave owners in Mozambique (Campbell 2004:23–24). Laxmichand Motichand, a prominent merchant in Mozambique was engaged in trade in Sofala as early as 1781 and owned the ship Minerva manned by 22 lascars (militia men) which was used to transport slave cargo (Machado 2003:22). Sowchand acquired his wealth and fame as one of the biggest financiers of the trade and also the owner of a large number of slaves (Ibid.).

Indian merchants especially from the trading communities of Gujarat were also active on the Swahili coast. In the nineteenth century, Zanzibar emerged as the centre of a vast commercial empire. It was a prosperous trade entrepôt and ivory was exported to India in the dhows, which returned loaded with cloth and brassware. There existed an insatiable demand for ivory in India. It was highly coveted by Indian women, especially by brides who used it as ornaments in marriage ceremonies. This never-ending demand for ivory was also driven by the fact that the ivory ornaments worn by women were broken when she became a widow and in accordance with Hindu customs, a deceased woman was cremated with her jewellery, creating more demand for ivory.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, the number of Indian merchants in Zanzibar was still small and this trade tended to be largely seasonal. They came mostly from Bhavnagar and Surat and sailed with the monsoon winds. The Indian traders residing in Zanzibar were not permitted to own land outside the town of Zanzibar (Ibid. 82–83). However, within a short time, the Indian merchant community had grown to 214 in 1819 and included merchants from Surat, Sindh and Kutch, one of whom was responsible for the administration of the customs house. The firm of Jairam Sewji, a wealthy trader from Gujarat was able to gain control over the customs of Zanzibar after 1819. In describing Zanzibar, Richard Burton wrote ‘The merchants, par excellence of Zanzibar, are the enterprising Bhattias or Cutch Ban- yans’ (Burton 1872:327). He states further that, ‘almost the whole foreign trade, or at least four-fifths of it passes through their hands, they are the principal shopkeepers and artisans’ (Ibid. 316). It was in the interests of the Omani authorities to integrate the Indian merchants into the commercial life of the empire and consequently, they were accorded religious toleration and protection as well as benefited from the removal of economic constraints and restrictions on their economic activities. By the mid-nineteenth century, they were successful in acquiring landed property outside Zanzibar (Sheriff 1987:87).
Another important Indian trader in Zanzibar was Topan Tajiani whose family came from a modest background in Lakhpat, Kutch but went on to become one of the wealthiest traders and influential member of the Khoja community. By mid-nineteenth century the Indian merchants dominated the trade in Zanzibar, and also amassed great wealth, due to their mercantile skills as well as their frugal habits and lifestyles. The chief import into Zanzibar comprised of cloth from Surat and Kutch known to the merchants as bafta and kaniki – Indian terms that were adopted in Kiswahili. This trade was known as swally from the term sawabil meaning coast (Sheriff 1987:84) and was dominated by the Kutchi merchants.

According to C.P. Rigby, the British Consul, ‘probably three-fourths of the immovable property on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba are either already in the possession of British subjects (Indians) or mortgaged by them’ (quoted in Sheriff 1987:108). In his travel account Burton tells us that one Ladha Damha controlled the customs house at Zanzibar, while his nephew Pisu had the same charge at Pemba Island. Mombasa customs was in the hands of Lakhmidas; Pangani under Trickandas; Ramji at Bagamoyo; and Kishindas at Kilwa. Thus the traders from Gujarat had a near monopoly over the customs along the entire East African coast.

It should be pointed out, however, that until the end of the nineteenth century, very few Indian merchants travelled to the interior of the continent. They made enormous profits from the capital they invested in the caravan trade, which comprised of slaves and cloves (Ibid. 82).

The merchants of Gujarat, especially those from Kutch continued their involvement in the slave trade. Despite the proclamations and laws passed in the years 1843 and 1860, which imposed severe punishments on those involved in the trade in humans, these Kutchi traders continued to participate in the slave trade because of its enormous profitability. Notable among these traders were Jairam Shivaji, Vat Bhima, Lodhi Damji, Shiva Haji, Alidina Visram, Saubhagya Devshi Shah, Khengar Govinji and Nasar Virji. Two brothers from Surat, Sayam and Musa Majuri also find mention as wealthy traders actively engaged in the trade. The Bhatias and the Khojas of Sindh and Kutch monopolised the trade with East Africa. According to estimates, approximately 200 slaves were transported annually to the port of Mandvi and they were valued at 200–300 cowries.¹⁰

The prosperous community of Indian merchants, traders and landowners in East Africa amassed considerable wealth as financiers of the slave trade. Even the formal abolition of slavery did not significantly
reduce their involvement in the trade, as it was undoubtedly a most lucrative undertaking. In the year 1860, the British Consul Rigby launched a campaign to emancipate nearly 8,000 slaves owned by Indians in East Africa whom he regarded as British subjects (Sheriff 1987:65). These Indians employed slaves for domestic work, as concubines and as labour on their plantations (Ibid. 139). That most of the Indians residing and settled on the coast kept slaves is evident from the writings of travellers like Burton.

Drawing from statistical data obtained from the Zanzibar Archives, Sheriff estimates that during 1860–1861, there were 237 Indian slave owners in Zanzibar alone who between them owned a total of 1,863 slaves (Sheriff 1989:140). By the middle of the nineteenth century, Indians in Zanzibar had acquired clove plantations that required intensive use of human labour. This necessitated their becoming slave owners. Ladha Damji of the firm of Jairam Shivji is said to have owned more than 400 slaves. In addition to owning several clove plantations, he was also the customs master of Zanzibar and an influential merchant (Ibid. 142). One can conjecture that the Indian merchants who owned slaves in Zanzibar probably took some of them back to India as domestic servants and possibly concubines. Most of these Indians participated in the slave trade as financiers, while it was the Arabs who actually captured and obtained slaves from the interior.11

The Dispatches and Memoranda to the Governor General in Council relating to the slave trade in the 1870s provide incontrovertible evidence of the active involvement of the Indian traders in the slave trade as financiers and slave traders. Dr Livingstone who had travelled extensively through East Africa reinforces this in his writings in which he clearly points to the complicity of the Indian traders in the trade in humans. He wrote ‘It is well known that the slave trade in this country is chiefly carried on entirely with his money and that of other British subjects, or natives of protected states of India.’ He goes on to state that ‘the Banians advance the food required, and the Arabs proceed inland as their agents, commit the man-stealing, or rather murdering, and when slaves and ivory are brought to the coast, the Arabs sell the slaves, the Banians pocketing the price’ (Livingston quoted in Dispatches with respect to the practice of the Slave Trade by the Subjects of the Native Princes of India, House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers on Slave Trade, London, 1876). Elsewhere, Livingston provides a scathing criticism of the Indian merchants when he states that ‘the Manyema cannibals are innocents compared with our protected Banian fellow subjects. By their Arab agents they compass the destruction of more human lives in one year than the Manyema do in
ten and could the Indian gentlemen who oppose the anti slave trade policy of the Foreign Office but witness the horrid deeds done by the banian agents, they would be foremost in decreeing that every Cutchee found guilty of direct or indirect slaving should forthwith be shipped back to India or to the Andaman Islands’ (Ibid. 705).

A number of these Bania traders who were subjects of the protected princely states were brought to trial for their activities as slave traders and owners. One such case involved an individual by the name of Kanjee Laljee of Kutch, domiciled in Zanzibar who was charged with illegally purchasing and holding six slaves. The arrest and committal of this trader had a beneficial impact as it resulted in a treaty between Her Majesty, the Queen and His Highness Syed Burgash, the sultan of Zanzibar. This treaty provides that ‘natives of Indian protected states shall be prohibited from possessing slaves’ (Ibid. 10).

While it cannot be disputed that the Indian merchants owned slaves, the official documents suggest that the slaves were generally treated well. In a letter to the Secretary of the Government of Bombay a senior magistrate wrote, ‘the slave at Zanzibar is not hard worked, he appears content and happy, and there is a peculiar feeling of kindness evinced by Banians [vanias] toward their slaves which cannot be traced to selfish feelings alone’ (cited by S. Ali 1995:244).

Official documents of the British Government state that when 231 slaves held by Indian subjects in Pemba were liberated, the majority were women who had cohabitated with these merchants for long periods of time. According to the official records, the majority of these women opted to remain with their masters (Foreign Department, Political Agent, Oct. 1875 no. 10–14 cited in Sadiq Ali 1995, p. 245).

Thus, it is evident from the official records and accounts that Indian traders, especially from the native states of India such as Kutch were complicit in the nineteenth-century slave trade, both as financiers and as slave owners.

Notes

1 The Rig Veda, a collection of poems in Sanskrit, is believed to be the earliest written sacred literature in India dating from ca.1500 to 900 BCE.
2 According to the writings of Pliny, the town of Barygaza (Bharuch) in the second century CE was known as an ‘Ethiopian Town’ (Wink 1990).
5 Memorandum, by J.P. Willoughby dated December 23, 1835, No. 3578/3579, no. 19. Political Department, Porbandar Vol. 685, Bombay Record Department.

6 Among the Muslim sects mentioned in the Census of 1901 were the Sheikhs who comprised three groups – the ‘Kureishi’, ‘Farukhi’and the ‘Siddiki’, the latter probably referred to the Sidis or Negro Africans.

7 Quoted in Pyrard de Laval, Francois. The Voyage of Francois Pyrard de Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas, and Brazil Dated 1599. Translated into English and edited by Albert Gray, Vol. 1, 1887, p. xxix.

8 For a detailed account of the role of merchants from western India see Pearson, Michael N. ‘Commerce and Compulsion: Gujarat Merchants and the Portuguese System in Western India, 1500–1600.’ Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1971.

9 According to the census taken in East Africa in 1887, the total population of Gujaratis settled on the East African coast was 6,434 of which the majority were Khojas, numbering 3, 398; 1,900 of them lived in Zanzibar, 385 in Bagamayo and 196 in Kilwa (Mehta, Makrand, History of International Trade and Custom Duties in Gujarat. Darshak Itihas Nidhi, Vadodara 1982:58).

10 According to Colomb’s account, approximately, 10,000 to 20,000 slaves passed through Zanzibar annually (Colomb 1873).

11 There are, however, occasional references to Indian merchants being deported to India for trading in slaves. One such mention is of a Bhatia merchant by the name of Kishoredas Hirji who was deported from Zanzibar to India for trading in slaves. See Political Department, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai, Vol. 124, 1867.
There are numerous references to Africans in India from the thirteenth century onwards. The lucrative East African slave trade carried out by the Arabs involved the transportation and sale of Africans from the Swahili coast to the Persian Gulf, Rea Sea ports and India. The region known as the Swahili coast extended from the shoreline of Northern Kenya to Southern Tanzania and included Zanzibar, Mozambique, Madagascar and Southeastern Somalia. Most of the slaves arriving in India came from Zanzibar via Muscat and Oman. According to available sources, Portuguese, Arabs and Indian merchants brought Africans with them as slaves.

The earliest reference to the presence of Africans in India in the official Indian records is from the thirteenth century, which mentions the Ethiopian soldier Jamal-ud-din bin Yakut, the stable master and favourite of Razia Begum (Lodhi 2007). Razia Begum, who came from Turkish slave background, was the first and only female sultan of Delhi. It is a popularly held belief that this fiercely independent sultan who wore men’s attire and rode horses antagonised the conservative clergy and supposedly was deposed for her affair with Yakut, an African slave. The latter is said to have been executed for his transgression. Ibn Battuta, the Moroccan traveller in his account also makes a reference to this incident. Speaking of the scandal he wrote, ‘she was suspected of relations with a slave of hers, one of the Abyssinians, so the people agreed to depose her and marry her to a husband’ (Albinia 2008:58). It seems clear from this that Africans could achieve power as commanders and military leaders but ultimately, there was a line they could not cross without jeopardising their lives. Thus, their acceptance into Islamic society was at best partial.

Another African mentioned in the records is Malik Sarvar, a eunuch and slave of Sultan Muhammad who rose in rank to become the
sultan’s deputy in 1389. Known as Khwaja Jahan, he received the title of Malik-ush-Sharq from the sultan and eventually ruled as an independent king (Majumdar 1960). He is credited with founding the Sharqi dynasty (1394–1479) of Jaunpur (Harris 1971).

Ibn Battuta, who travelled through India in the fourteenth century, also makes a mention of African slaves. Commenting on their presence, he wrote, ‘At Qandahar, we embarked on a ship which had a complement of fifty rowers and fifty Abyssinian men-at-arms.’ He remarked on the role these Abyssinians played as the guarantors of safety on the Indian Ocean and states, ‘let there be one of them on a ship and it will be avoided by the Indian pirates and idolaters’ (Battuta, Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325–1354 translated by H.A.R. Gibbs 1986:229–230).

Battuta also makes a special mention of the governor of Alabur (located in southern Karnataka), whom Battuta identifies as the Abyssinian Badr, a slave of the sultan, ‘a man whose bravery passed into a proverb’ (Ibid.) In his account, Battuta makes a mention of a eunuch by the name of Sunbul who attended on him during the course of his visit to Delhi. During his stay there it is believed the sultan of Delhi presented him with African slave girls (Sayeed, Frontline, May 13, 2016:71).

According to tradition, as early as the thirteenth century, Africans played a significant role in the armies of Gujarat. In 1572, when the Mughals conquered Gujarat, there were said to be 700 Habshis in the cavalry comprising of 12,000 horsemen in Gujarat. Many Habshis had risen to the position of commanders in the armies and some became wealthy merchants.

Accounts by European travellers, adventurers and officials contain frequent references to the African settlements in India. While the origins and the ancestry of the Siddis are shrouded in mystery and cannot be fully substantiated, these accounts by European travellers and officials provide interesting information on Africans in India.

Foreign travellers such as Niccolo Conti and Abdur Razzak who visited India in the fifteenth century make a mention of the great wealth of Gujarat and her trade with regions of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, the East African Coast and Southeast Asia. Niccolo de’ Conti (1395–1469) was a Venetian merchant and explorer who travelled to India and Southeast Asia and possibly Southern China. Abd-al-Razzak was an Islamic scholar and chronicler who visited Calicut, India as ambassador of the Timurid dynasty of Persia. Both these accounts provide interesting references to the Indian Ocean trade. Pedro Alvares Cabral
who arrived in Malindi in 1500 is said to have hired Gujarati pilots to help him navigate his way to India, providing another account.

In the fifteenth century, a Russian traveller by the name of Athanasius Nikitin (1468–1474) travelled through India and provided fascinating information. He mentions that Dabhol in Ratnagiri district (in present-day Maharashtra) was a meeting place for cultures and people from the west coast of India and Ethiopia. Nikitin visited the Bahmani king. In his writings, he mentions that the vizier, Mohammed Gawan, was an African. He also makes a mention of Gulbarga and Bidar in the Deccan where there was trade in horses, silk damask and ‘black slaves’ (Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Part 1 ed. James Macnabb Campbell, Government Central Press, Bombay, 1896).

Tome Pires, a European traveller in the sixteenth century refers to the presence of Habshis in the Deccan when he states, ‘The people who govern the Kingdom are Abyssinians. These are looked upon as knights; they are greatly esteemed; they wait on the kings in their apartments. The chief among them are eunuchs and these come to be kings and great lords in the kingdom. Those who are not eunuchs are fighting men.’ Pires also comments on the skills of the seafaring people of Gujarat when he writes ‘The Gujaratis are better seamen and do more navigating than the other people of India and they have larger ships and more men to man them. They are great pilots and do a great deal of navigation’ (Cited in Mehta 1982:20).

Jan Huygen Linschoten, a Dutch protestant merchant, traveller and writer has also left behind a fascinating account. He obtained service with the Archbishop of Goa and sailed for Goa in 1583. In his diary he states, ‘From Mozambique great numbers of these Caffares are carried into India, and many times they sell a man or a woman that is growne to their full [strength], for two or three ducats’ (Linschoten 1596:275). Describing slavery in Goa, Linschoten states that most Portuguese owned five, six, ten or twenty slaves, both men and women (Ibid. 193).

Francois Pyrard de Laval, a French navigator and a native of Laval (ca. 1578–1623) visited Goa in the seventeenth century and wrote in his travel account that most of the wealth amassed by the Portuguese in India was due to the hard labour of the slaves (The Voyage of Francois Pyrard de Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil. Translated into English by Albert Gray, Vol. 1, 1887). Pyrard describes the Portuguese society in Goa as depraved and idle, enjoying all kinds of luxuries. He informs us that the banquet table of the fidalgos was attended by many slaves whose task was to fan away flies and play music for their masters while they ate (Ibid. 83).
Another traveller who travelled through Western India in the seventeenth century and recorded his observations on slaves was Mandelslo who wrote that slavery was an accepted institution in Portuguese India. He states, further, that slaves carried the masters in palanquins and that children born to slaves became the property of their masters (Mandelslo 1931:78–81). A reference to Africans is also made by the English merchant William Finch who travelled to India as an agent of the East India Company. Finch landed at Surat in 1608 and later spent a year at the Mughal court. His writings contain careful observations. He wrote in 1610 that Malik Ambar commanded ‘some ten thousand of his own [caste], all brave soldiers, and some forty thousand Deccanese’ (Finch: See Dictionary of National Biography, Volume 19, 1889).

Other English travellers also commented on the African presence in India. In 1698, John Fryer, an officer of the Royal Navy (1753–1817) wrote that Africans were appointed to key positions in India. He goes on to state, ‘Frizled Woolly-pated Blacks were given great preferments’ (quoted in Albinia 2008:59). John Henry Grose, another Englishman who travelled to India in 1750 as a civil servant for the East India Company published a two-volume work called, A Voyage to the East Indies. In it he wrote in 1772 that Ethiopian slaves were greatly in demand by Indo-Muslim rulers ‘for their courage, fidelity, and shrewdness; in which they so far excel, as often to rise to posts of great trust and honor, and are made governors of places’. Grose also went on to state that since many of the Muslim rulers in India themselves came from slave dynasties, they treated their slaves with ‘great humanity, and bind them to faithful and even affectionate service, by their tenderness and next to parental care of them’ (Ibid. 59).

Tod, the British traveller who undertook a journey through Western India makes several references to his encounters with African sailors and slaves. He states that at Mandvi in Gujarat, he saw a fleet of twenty ships manned by Africans and ‘Swarthy Ethiop’ (Tod 1839:449–450). In his account he writes, ‘From these varied groups I passed to a yet more novel spectacle, the ships in the roadstead, which ply to “the golden coast of Sofala,” or “spicy shores of Araby the blest”’ (Ibid. 450). During the days of slavery, the best slaves could fetch 200–300 cowries (about 80 rupees or 10 pounds sterling).

The explorer Richard Burton, in his extensive travels through Gujarat during the nineteenth century reported that 600–700 Africans were arriving annually (Burton 1851:254–260). Gujarat also served as a gateway or point of entry for many Africans from Muslim Persia, who brought with them the cultural influences from the Persian Empire.
In his book on Sindh, Burton described a Sheedi dance at the shrine of Manghopir in which he writes, ‘The bevvy of African dames have uncomely limbs and dance with “all the grace of a Punjab bear”; the men howl “like maniacs” and drum with “all the weight of their monstrous muscular arms”’ (quoted in Albinia 2008:60). Describing the Africans in Sindh, Burton refers to the two kinds of African slaves – the ghara-jao or slaves who were born locally and others who were imported from Muscat and the other ports in the Persian Gulf (Burton 1951:4). Describing these slaves he writes, ‘The Africans now in Sindh are ignorant and illiterate to the last degree. In disposition they are at once cheerful and surly, merry and passionate: The natives declare that they are as revengeful as camels, and subject to fits of sulkiness so intense that nothing but the most violent corporeal punishment will cure them . . . Brave and remorseless, they are also the most daring and treacherous of villains; nothing, in fact, except the certainty of death can deter them from robbery and bloodshed . . . Their fondness for sensual pleasures is remarkable . . . their great delights are eating, drinking, music and dancing’ (Burton 1851:255; Voyage of Van Linschoten to the East Indies 1970:269). It is evident from this account that by the nineteenth century, the Europeans had established and accepted derogatory stereotypes of Africans that would survive into the present times.

Major Hamerton, the British Consul in Muscat reported in 1853, that ‘a lively slave trade existed between Zanzibar and the Indian states of Cutch and Kathiawar’ (Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 2003:10). This is corroborated by Marianna Postans who travelled through Kutch and Western India in the mid-nineteenth century. She makes an interesting reference to the rao of Kutch being attended by a ‘negro giant’, who according to her served as a royal jester and entertainer to the rao (Postans 1839:38).

Portuguese travellers have also left accounts of the slave trade. Pietro della Valle who travelled to Goa wrote in 1623, ‘the people are numerous but the greatest part are slaves, a black and lewd generation, going naked for the most part seeming to me rather a disparagement than an ornament to the city’ (quoted in Pinto 1992:80). In describing the slave markets of Goa he records that ‘In the plaza are sold all sorts of merchandise; and among other things, quantities of slaves’ (Travels of Pietro della Valle in India ed. by E. Grey, 1892:50). In his writings, he provides a description of how the slaves, both men and women were examined thoroughly from head to foot, like rest of the merchandise for sale in the market. He mentions that female slaves comprised both Africans and Indians but, ‘. . . of all those females [the] most pleasing
are the servant girls Cafres de Mocambique and [those] from other parts of Africa, who are of black color, very dark and have curly hair, and who are called negresses of Guine’ (Ibid. 51). He describes these women and states that many of them were very beautiful and lovely. We learn from many of these travel accounts that the fidalgo or gentry of Goa often owned a large number of slaves who were desired for the prestige that came from owning slaves and because they were status symbols.

Another Portuguese traveller and writer, Joao de Barros whose writings were published in 1552–1553 titled ‘Decadas da Asia’ states that he saw three Abyssinians of the country of Prester John who were selling provisions to the Portuguese ships (cited in Chauhan 1995:25). He goes on to mention that the ruler of Bassein, Sultan Bahadur had thousands of Abyssinians in his army.

We also have some accounts by Dutch travellers, which make a mention of the Africans. Pieter Gielis van Ravesteijn in his account praised the discipline and efficiency of Ambar’s military organisation and referred to the large number of African ‘caffers’ as he called them, whom he described as ‘black as a Moor’ (van Ravesteijn, Journal p. 177 cited by Robbins 2006:58).

Thus, it is clear that the extensive contacts between Africa and India have deep historical roots and the Indian Ocean slave trade predates by many centuries the Atlantic slave trade. There exist, however, significant differences between the two, both in number of slaves, as well as the rights accorded and opportunities available to them. The Atlantic slave trade, which flourished between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, was first and foremost, an economic institution, which treated Africans as chattels and prohibited them from practicing their religion or culture. In contrast, the slaves in the East African slave trade had far greater opportunities for upward mobility and cultural retention. It should also be pointed out that Islamic law clearly defined the legal rights of slaves, especially the concubines, regarding emancipation and the birth of children, sired by the masters, who could not be sold as slaves. Thus, slaves who had converted to the religion of Islam found it easier to gain a measure of acceptance and to assimilate in their new homelands.

Until the nineteenth century, the number of slaves captured in the hinterland of the African continent was limited, as travel into the interior of the continent was both hazardous and dangerous. Diseases like sleeping sickness brought on by the tsetse fly, malaria and yellow fever claimed many lives. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge about the lands and peoples of the interior served as a deterrent to the
penetration of the interior. Nineteenth-century advances in medicine, combined with the introduction of firearms and the exploration of the African continent by adventurers and travellers opened the African continent to the outside world and to greater exploitation. The introduction of firearms made it easier to obtain Africans from the interior and make them captives. The export of slaves from the East African coast to Asia reached its peak in the first half of the nineteenth century. The indigenous tribes were helpless and unable to protect themselves against the slavers who possessed firearms. Slaves from Africa were imported in Arab vessels to the native princely states of Kutch, Kathiawar (including Porbandar), Sindh and the Portuguese ports of Goa, Diu and Daman.

The Sidi slaves were valued for their docility but also had the reputation of being trustworthy, faithful, energetic, brave, courageous and loyal. Consequently, they were appointed as military commanders, bodyguards, in the harems and keepers of the royal seals. Eventually, many became wazirs and governors. These factors may have contributed to their success and prosperity in India both in the native princely states and in other regions of India. It should be stressed that African slaves were not brought to India purely for their labour, since the existing feudal system and caste structure provided ample cheap labour. They were primarily symbols of status and prestige, mainly for elite consumption. Some of the Sidi slaves on the west coast of India rose to positions of power from domestic slaves in the royal courts to sultans and kings – from humble sailors to admirals of the naval force and commanders of the fighting forces on land. Possessed with administrative skills, some were appointed as governors while they constituted the best soldiers in the army and skilled warriors in military engagements. They also distinguished themselves as hunters of wild animals, and excelled as marksmen and sharp shooters.

Thus, beginning with the fifteenth century, we have colourful descriptions of the Africans in India in the writings of travellers who provide us with eyewitness accounts. These serve as useful source materials for reconstructing the African presence in India and beyond.

Notes

1 There was a substantial population of Indian merchants settled in Muscat who may have brought their slaves to India. According to an account written by a Danish merchant in 1765, ‘In no other Mahomedan city are the Banias so numerous as in Muskat; their numbers in the city amount to no fewer than twelve hundred’ (Calvin Miller 1978:103).


The descendants of Africans played significant roles in the independent sultanates of Bengal, Deccan, Gujarat, Khandesh, Jaunpur, Malwa as well as Goa, Diu and Daman and the present-day countries of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The following is a brief description of these kingdoms.

**Sidis in Gujarat**

Because of its geographical location on the west coast of India, Gujarat was always a principal destination for African slaves and traders in India. From very early times, the southwest monsoon winds made it possible to travel between the Swahili coast and the west coast of Gujarat. The dhows carried soldiers, sailors, merchants, crewmen and pearl divers. According to tradition, Africans were represented in the armies of the rulers and states of Gujarat as early as the thirteenth century, possibly even earlier. They may have come as sailors, mercenaries or slaves and were later also recruited to fight against the Portuguese.

Sidis first attained political power on the west coast of India in the late fifteenth century. They also assumed power later under the Nizam Shahi dynasty of Ahmadnagar in the Deccan. Subsequently, they served as tributaries to the Adil Shahi sultans of Bijapur and the Mughal emperors.

Prior to the sultanate period (established in early fifteenth century), Kolaba and Konkan (regions lying to the south of Mumbai) and their coastal areas were under the jurisdiction of the Rajput rulers of Gujarat whose headquarters were at Anhilwad Patan. The capital was taken over by the sultans. By the time of Sultan Mahmud Shah I (1459–1511), African slaves constituted a part of the army. It is reported that during the reign of Sultan Bahadur Shah (ca. 1526–1537), there were 5,000 Habshis in Ahmedabad alone (Ross 1910:97). Several Africans
or Habshis as they were known distinguished themselves as military commanders. In 1530, an African named Saiful-Muluk Miftah served Bahadur Shah as the Commander of the Fort of Daman where he is said to have maintained a garrison of 4,000 Habshis (Robbins 2006:126). Bahadur Shah’s nephew, Mahmud Shah III also utilised the services of a large number of Africans and appointed an Abyssinian slave named Mandal Dilawaz Khan in 1553 to command a bodyguard of 12,000 foreign soldiers. He was killed in battle the same year (Commissariat 1938:470). For his loyalty, he was given the title of Ulugh Khan I. The same title was conferred on three other Habshis. The first of the three was Yagut Sibit Khan, also known as Ulugh Khan II, who was a wazir of Sultan Mahmud Shah and is buried at Sarkhej on the outskirts of Ahmedabad along with Bilal Jhujhar Khan (Bilal Habsi) of Khandesh. Ulugh Khan II’s son, Khairat Khan was given the title of Ulugh Khan III. Bilal Jhujhar Khan was appointed as governor of Burhanpur (now in the state of Madhya Pradesh) in 1538–1539 under Mubarak Shah. The third noble who was also conferred the title of Ulugh Khan was Marjan Sultani Habshi, son of Bilal (Commissariat 1938:470–471). The Muslims revere his tomb at Surat even today.

During the period of the sultanate, particularly after the death of Sultan Muhammad III, Sidi Juzarkh (1560–1571) had become powerful. Several mosques and rozas were constructed during this period. He was eventually captured and killed by Mughal Emperor Akbar. The descendants of these Sidi soldiers had settled in the Khanpur area of Ahmedabad, where their presence is still noticeable today. The Sidis have a long association with the city of Ahmedabad and are credited with its economic prosperity. According to popular legend when Ahmad Shah founded the city of Ahmedabad in 1412, there were twelve entrances or gates to the city. It was the Sidis who guarded the entrances to the city to make certain that the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi, would not abandon the city, thereby protecting its wealth (Personal communication with Sidi community leader in Ahmedabad: Rumanaben, 13 May 2012).

Some of the Sidis of Veraval on the west coast in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat claim to be descendants of soldiers who had come as drumbeaters with the army of Sultan Muhammad of Ghazni in ca. 1024. Their role was to raise the spirit of the soldiers. In Gujarat these drumbeaters were referred to as ‘nagarchi’1 and the chief drumbeater was called ‘nagarsha’ who occupied a position of prestige. There is a mosque in the village of Jambur called the ‘drum beaters’ mosque (Naik and Pandya 1993:4). After the invasion of Somnath, Ghazni left behind some of the drumbeaters in Saurashtra and Kutch.
However, this view has not been authenticated. In 1299, Alauddin Khilji defeated the Rajput ruler Karan Vaghela and imposed his rule on Gujarat. According to sources, there were many Sidi soldiers in his army and some of them stayed back in Kutch. Some Sidis were brought to India by the Khoja (Ismaili) and Bhatia traders of Kutch who were active in the East African trade. Elsewhere in Gujarat, the state of Junagadh was also home to a large number of Africans. The nawabs of Junagadh and Radhanpur had a history of recruiting Africans to serve in their courts. Some of them rose to positions of power such as one Sidi Ismail who was appointed prime minister of Radhanpur in ca. 1820. The wall paintings in the city palace of Jamnagar, the Aina Mahal in Kutch and the palace in Bhavnagar provide visual evidence of the African presence in these old native states of Gujarat.

Because of its geographical location, Gujarat served as the gateway to India for Africans from East Africa, Red Sea and the Persian Gulf regions. Many Africans from Muslim Persia who arrived in Gujarat also brought cultural influences from the Persian Empire.

The Mughal Emperor Akbar conquered Gujarat in 1572. According to Robbins, there exists a painting depicting the surrender of Itimad Khan, governor of Ahmedabad and Surat and the handing over of the African slaves to Akbar (Robbins 2006:124).

**Sidis in Khandesh**

Located on the border of Gujarat and Maharashtra, the history of Khandesh, which now forms the northwestern part of Maharashtra state, also includes some Africans who rose through their abilities and military skills to positions of power. Prominent among them was Bilal Jhujhar Khan who was a military commander under the ruler Mubarak Shah II (1536–1566) and later served as the governor of Burhanpur until his death in 1558. His descendants and heirs, Aziz Khan and Marjan Sultani Habshi and grandson Amin Khan also made notable contributions to Khandesh.

**Sidis in the Deccan**

The region referred to as the ‘Deccan’ (or the ‘south’) extends from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal and constitutes the heart of peninsular India. It was for centuries a highly contested terrain because of its strategic location at the crossroads of and as a meeting place between the North and the South. In the late thirteenth century, this region was conquered by Muslim invaders and subsequently came to be known
as the Bahmani Sultanate. Later it split up into the independent kingdoms of Bijapur, Bidar, Berar, Ahmadnagar and Golconda. Today, this region includes the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The descendants of Africans played a prominent role in the history of this region. It was in the Deccan that the Africans achieved their greatest power and left an indelible mark on the history of the region. Ibn Battuta who travelled extensively through India in the mid-fourteenth century remarks on their presence. As mentioned earlier, Battuta wrote that ‘the Habshis are the guarantors of safety on the Indian Ocean; let there be but one of them on a ship and it will be avoided by the Indian pirates and idolators’ (Battuta, Travels in Asia and Africa 1325–1354, translated by H. R. Gibbs 1929:229–230). He mentions specifically that they served as sailors and bodyguards.

The Bahmani Kingdom in the Deccan attained its greatest power in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It recruited Africans from Northeast Africa to serve as soldiers, sailors, administrators and personal bodyguards in the harems. Some of them rose to occupy positions of power in the military and civil administration. The governors of several provinces of the Bahmani Kingdom were men of African descent. Evidence of their power is still seen in Bidar, the Bahmani capital where the imposing building known as Habshi Kot (fortress of the Abyssinians) can be found, which contains some of the tombs of these Africans. In Bijapur, the Abyssinian party exercised considerable power, many of their members becoming wazirs, such as Sidi Ambar, Sidi Yusufa (died 1655), Fateh Khan and Sidi Masud (1678–1683). Another notable African in Bijapur was Khavass Khan Habshi who assisted the Mughals against Shivaji in 1660. He was rewarded for his loyalty by being appointed wazir of Bijapur. Africans in the Bahmani court were valued for their loyalty and military capabilities and a number of them were buried at Habshi Kot and at Marjan. An inscription in the Bidar fort makes mention of an African general.

Starting from the sixteenth century and continuing for several centuries after that, India was ruled by the powerful Mughals, who dominated much of North India and Afghanistan. However, the Deccan was broken up into numerous small, but autonomous and culturally thriving sultanates, the most significant of which was Bijapur. From 1580 to 1627, Ibrahim Adil Shah II, a patron of art and learning, ruled Bijapur. His reign has been called the golden age of Bijapur. His reign is, however, best remembered, as it was during his time that Ikhlas Khan, a Habshi rose to the position of the prime minister. Ikhlas Khan is represented in many of the paintings of the Deccan School of Art (See images of Ikhlas Khan in Chapter 8). Bijapur was under
the regency of Chand Bibi, the widow of the deceased ruler. It was during her regency that a group of former African slaves who were known as the ‘Abyssinian Party’ seized control over Bijapur. Dilawar Khan, their leader installed Sunni Africans to replace the Shia soldiers. Dilawar Khan was replaced by Ikhlas Khan (Robbins and McLeod 2006:33–34).

Thus, when the Bahmani Kingdom broke up into separate kingdoms, the Habshis continued to exert great influence in Ahmadnagar, Golconda and Bijapur. The Ahmadnagar Sultanate was founded in 1496. According to a Muslim history of Ahmadnagar, Malik Ahmad (1490–1508) was the founder of the Ahmadnagar dynasty. He is credited with being the first to appoint Abyssinians as the captains of the fort of Janjira. The Africans exercised power here about the same time as in Bijapur. The African factions took advantage of the political instability and political intrigues to overthrow the regent queen and were appointed to the office of the peshwa (ruler). While in theory Ahmadnagar was ruled by the Nizam Shahi family, it was the Habshis who actually wielded real powers. This included men like Abhang Khan and Malik Ambar. They adopted the culture and manners of the court, which is reflected in the miniature paintings of the time (Robbins 2006:63).

The best known of these Habshis was Malik Ambar, a former slave said to have been born in 1548 in Southern Ethiopia, sold into slavery in Baghdad and later purchased by Chengiz Khan, the peshwa of Ahmadnagar. Malik Ambar served as prime minister of Ahmadnagar from 1600 to 1626 and eventually became the de facto ruler of Ahmadnagar until 1648. A brilliant military leader, astute politician and strategist, Ambar emerged as the most powerful individual in the Nizam Shahi state and was recognised by his arch enemy, the Mughal Emperor Jahangir who stated in his Memoirs, ‘In the art of soldiering, Ambar was unique in his age’ (quoted in Elliot and Dawson 1867:414). Jahangir while acknowledging the military skills of Ambar hated him and described him in derogatory terms as ‘Ambar, the black-faced’, ‘ill starred Ambar’, ‘Ambar of dark fate’, ‘the treacherous trickster’, ‘the damn Ambar’ and ‘crafty Ambar’ (Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri or Memoirs of Jahangir, edited by Beveridge, 2 volumes, reprint Delhi, 1968:155–156; 207–208; 220, 312, 368, 373). Jahangir referred to Khirki, the capital of Ambar as ‘Kharki, the nest of owls’ (Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir 1999:187). The owl was regarded as a bird of ill omen and hence this epithet. Malik Ambar was instrumental in manoeuvring the expulsion of the Mughals from Ahmadnagar and it was with his strong backing that Murtaza II was
crowned the ruler of Ahmadnagar in 1600. Ambar also led expeditions against Golconda and Bidar and emerged as a force to be reckoned with in the Deccan. He later installed his son-in-law Murtaza Nizam Shah II as the sultan of Ahmadnagar.

Malik Ambar proved to be a formidable threat to the Mughals and defended the kingdom against the Mughal army. He founded a new capital at Khirki (which later came to be known as Aurangabad), the architecture of which still bears witness to the power of his architectural contributions and of Sidis. His tomb at Khuldabad, a short distance from Daulatabad is a fine example of the elegant architecture of the Nizam Shahi period (1490–1633). Upon his death, the king of Ahmadnagar continued to rule under the strong influence of yet another Habshi, Hamid Khan and his wife. Another African by the name of Dilawar served as a bodyguard, ultimately serving as a regent in 1583. These men of African slave descent often actively recruited and promoted other Africans, thus, forging a powerful African identity based on ties of race and religion (Obeng 2003:107). A contemporary of Malik Ambar, Habshi Ikhlas Khan (1627–1656) served as the wazir of Bijapur. There are numerous surviving portraits of Ikhlas Khan and Malik Ambar in the art of Medieval Deccan (see Chapter 8).

In 1636, the sultanate of Ahmadnagar was annexed by the Mughals in the province of Bijapur, another African general, Habash Khan rose to prominence first under the Adil Shahi Kingdom and then the Mughals. Habash Khan’s name is associated with the Phatak (Gate) in Old Delhi. Habash Khan’s name is associated with the Phatak (Gate) in Old Delhi. Habash Khan’s name is associated with the Phatak (Gate) in Old Delhi. Habash Khan’s name is associated with the Phatak (Gate) in Old Delhi. For nearly a century, the independent sultanates of Deccan successfully resisted the powerful Mughals. Ultimately, however, the Mughals overran and conquered them. Ahmadnagar, once the seat of Ambar’s power, was annexed by Shahjahan while Bijapur was conquered by Aurangzeb in 1686; Golconda succumbed in 1687. Khirki, Malik Ambar’s capital was renamed Aurangabad by Aurangzeb to commemorate his victory in the Deccan.

The Golconda Sultanate was located east of Bijapur and near the present-day Hyderabad. Here too the Habshis rose to eminence and contributed to its arts and architecture. A Habshi noble is said to have built the mosque Masjid-e Miyan Mushk while Malik Khushnud, said to be a slave of the sultan, is credited as being the author of two ‘masnavis’ poems (Robbins 2006:37).

With the decline of the sultanates, there emerged yet another power in the Deccan – Hyderabad, under the rule of the nizams which became the centre of the trade in slaves. Mostly carried out by the Arabs, this traffic in slaves brought Africans into India and elsewhere in the
Indian Ocean world from Muscat and other Gulf ports and flourished in the nineteenth century.

During the rule of the nizams, centred in the city of Hyderabad, a large number of so-called Habshis are said to have served also as domestic slaves in the nizam’s service, in addition to serving in the fighting forces known as Nazm-e-Jamiat. When the nizam attended the royal coronation of Edward the VII in Delhi in 1903, he was accompanied by eight of his African bodyguards.

After the abolition of slavery in the middle of the nineteenth century, it is believed that a number of slaves entered Hyderabad disguised as women. They pretended to be wives and daughters of wealthy pilgrims with the intent to avoid capture by British immigration officials. The increasing influx of Africans from Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula also caused concern to the British who perceived it as a threat to the stability of the British Empire. Consequently, in 1882, the Government of India began to restrict the movement of Africans into Hyderabad. It justified this action on the grounds that ‘the Africans consort with Arabs, follow the same leaders, are of the same turbulent habits and for political purposes, are practically the same’ (Harris 1971:104). The apprehension and unease of the British is reflected in an official memorandum that stated, ‘No one at Hyderabad would like to see breach-loaders under any circumstance put into the hands of the African Guards, of whom everybody there seemed to be a good deal afraid.’ This Memorandum reflected the popular image of the Africans that ‘being loose in discipline they [the guardsmen] used to indulge in drunkenness, gambling and rowdiness’ (Ibid. 105). Sidi presence is still visible today in the city of Hyderabad where there is a well-known place called Habshiguda, which includes a mosque by the name of Habshi Masjid. Many of the Africans who arrived in Hyderabad were single and often took local women as their wives. Thus, inevitably they assimilated into Muslim society and built an identity based on their affiliation to Islam. Today, the descendants of Africans live in a locality known as Siddi Ganj and most of them speak the Urdu language (Obeng 2007:245). Numerous localities in the city bear names such as Habshiguda, Siddi Anbar Bazaar and Bagh Amberpet that show an association with the Sidis.

Sidis in Oudh (Lucknow)

An interesting finding in recent years has brought to light that there also existed a Sidi community in Lucknow (now in Uttar Pradesh). The
Oudh (also known as Awadh) royal family is said to have recruited African slaves as their bodyguards.

Mention is made of the recruitment of African slaves in the official accounts as early as the nineteenth century. In 1858 when the British overran Lucknow, they were attacked and fired upon by the nawab’s African eunuchs who served as his bodyguards and demonstrated a strong sense of loyalty to him (Albinia 2008:58). The Nawab Saadat Ali Khan employed Habshi boys as jockeys at the turn of the nineteenth century. Another nawab imported more than a dozen slaves transported in an Arab ship and then taken to Oudh by land to avoid British jurisdiction and capture. African female slaves who were armed with muskets guarded the zenana or female royal quarters. According to Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, the last nawab of Lucknow, Wajid Ali Shah owned a Habshi Risalla Regiment comprising of 1,200 Africans. According to one source, more than 1,000 slaves arrived in Lucknow between 1847 and 1848 (Llewelyn-Jones 2006:209). The nawab also established a school known as Pari Khana or the Fairy House to train young girls as singers and dancers; many of the attractive ones then recruited for his harem. There were a handful of Sidis who rose to positions of prominence in Oudh, among whom mention is made of one Haji Ali Sharif, an Abyssinian who led a cavalry regiment. Diyanat-ud-Daula also an African was appointed as collector of customs and excise (Ibid. 75–76). Diyanat-ud-Daula, much favoured by the nawab, became rich and powerful and is credited with building a Shia religious shrine named Kerbala Diyanat-ud-Daula, which was modelled after the Karbala in Arabia. An even more fascinating fact is that he also had a regiment of African women called Gulabi Platoon, which is said to have taken up arms against the British in the uprising of 1857 (Ibid. 90). According to the contemporary accounts, the king’s bodyguards consisted of African women who dressed in red jackets and tight-fitting rose-coloured trousers, which accounts for the name by which they were known (Ibid.) Several African women are said to have been involved in fighting against the British and lost their lives defending Oudh.

With the suppression of the 1857 uprising against British rule and the reassertion of British control over Oudh, the Africans who had once loyally served the nawab lost their power and sank into poverty. Deprived of the protection of the nawab and with no means of livelihood, they were treated indifferently and punished for their support of the nawab in 1857. The few hundred that remained eked out a living as entertainers, fakirs or in unskilled labour.
Sidis in Goa, Diu and Daman

The Portuguese were among the first Europeans to import slaves into India. As early as the sixteenth century, the Portuguese came to dominate the Indian Ocean slave trade. They imported a large number of African slaves into the Portuguese territories of Goa, Daman and Diu on the west coast of India to work on farms as well as domestic work, carrying umbrellas and palanquins. Until the Portuguese took over Daman, it had been in the control of the Sidis. Daman, south of Surat, was located strategically on the mouth of the Gulf of Cambay. It is believed that Daman was seized by the Portuguese from an Abyssinian by the name of Sidi Bofeta who defended it from a fort. The ruins of the fort survive to this day. There is an inscription in the fort which states ‘Bastiao da Fortaleza de Abexim Sidi Bofeta Tomada Pelos Portuguezes em 1559’ (Bastiao of the Fortress of Abyssinian Sidi Bofeta Taken by the Portuguese in 1559). Another Sidi chief by the name of Sidi Marium also came into conflict with the Portuguese when he marched against them in 1561–1562. The defence of the castle of Diu is credited to one Sidi Elal who led a force of 400 men and several hundred horses, thus compelling the Portuguese to retreat. Ultimately, the Portuguese gained control over these areas. The Portuguese territory was referred to as ‘Estado da India’. The African slaves imported into Portuguese territories came mainly from Brazil, Angola and Mozambique. They were primarily used as domestic servants and in agriculture. According to available records, the Goan natives themselves participated as brokers in the procurement of slaves. The latter were called ‘Mhamays’. Many of the slaves were converted to Christianity and given names such as Ignacio, Januario, Joao, Alberto and Joaquim. The conversion to Christianity and the adoption of Christian names served to obscure and erase their African origins.

The cosmopolitan nature of slavery and the greater acceptance of interracial marriages resulted in considerable genetic admixture in the population of Goa. Along with Portuguese and Indian genetic traits, the population of Goa also incorporated Bantu-Negroid genes. Traces of African blood are evident in some communities of the Salsette Christians, Konkan Muslims and the Thakurs, as well as the Talheri Kunbis.

Due to the harsh treatment of slaves in Portuguese territories, many of the Sidis fled to neighbouring states and kingdoms to escape their slave masters and the oppression of their daily lives. Some found their way to Karnataka and settled in the dense forest regions. Interestingly, they built villages similar to the ones made by the Maroons in the
Caribbean and sustained themselves on forestlands and forest produce. The Sidis who had converted to Christianity in Goa assumed new names in Karnataka, which bore resemblance to and reveal their Christian backgrounds. Examples include ‘Mannia’ for ‘Manoel’, ‘Bastian’ for ‘Sebastian’ and names derived from Kannada, such as ‘Poota’, ‘Sanna’ and ‘Lookda’ (Chauhan 1995:242).

Sidis in Bengal

The region known as Bengal today including Bangladesh came under the control of the Muslim sultans of Delhi in the thirteenth century. Thereafter, the sultan of West Bengal Shams-al-Din Ilyas Shah founded the sultanate of Bengal. Slaves of African descent asserted their power as far east as in Bengal, especially in the late fifteenth century (Harris 1971:79). A few of them rose to positions of political prominence.

Africans in Bengal asserted considerable power. According to the historian Ferishta, Ruknuddin Barbak Shah, the king of Bengal (1459–1474) promoted a substantial number of African slaves to high rank. He is said to have recruited 8,000 African soldiers for his army (cited in Goron, ‘The Habshi Sultans of Bengal’ in Robbins 2006:131). A handful of them killed Barbak’s successor and installed one of their own on the throne. Africans controlled the kingdom for a number of years but were later expelled by Alauddin Hussain of Bengal (Ibid.). Many of them subsequently migrated to Gujarat and South India. A period of instability followed Barbak’s death. Africans exploited the court intrigues to usurp power. In 1486, a eunuch commander by the name of Shahzada led a group of Africans and staged a successful coup, after which he assumed the title of Barbak Shah. He was subsequently murdered by another African, Andil Shah who assumed the name of Saifuddin Firuz Shah (1487–1490) and ruled for three years. A benevolent ruler, he was also a patron of art and architecture. He is credited with commissioning several buildings including an elegant ten-domed mosque at Goamalti and another at Gaur (Stan Goron, Ibid. 132). Other African rulers included Ghiyath-al-Din Barbak Shah and Qutb-al-Din Mahmud Shah. After the latter’s death, another African by the name of Habesh Khan assumed power. Mention must also be made of Nasiruddin Mahmud (1490–1491). In the year 1490, Sidi Badr, an African guardsman seized the throne from Habesh Khan, the autocratic ruler of Bengal and ruled for more than three years (1491–1493) under the title of Shams-ud-din Abu Nasr Muzaffar Shah, 1490–1493 (Jadunath Sarkar 1977:39–41). According to contemporary records, he had an army of 30,000 of which
5,000 were Africans of Ethiopian descent (Majumdar 1960:346). All the rulers of Bengal struck coins in their names, which is indicative of their power and sovereignty. These coins are also of enormous interest to historians as they provide invaluable information about names and chronology. Habshi rule ended in Bengal when it was replaced by the Arab Husaini dynasty. The death of Muzzafar Shah in 1493 as well as the subsequent expulsion and dispersal of Africans in high position marked the decline of African power in Bengal (Ibid. 346). These Africans, however, left their imprint on the kingdom of Bengal.

Slavery was also widely prevalent in Calcutta (Kolkata), as late as in the eighteenth century where the Arab traders mainly carried on the trade. According to Banaji (1932), African pageboys were as common a sight in wealthy homes in Calcutta and Bombay as in the homes of English aristocracy in London. According to the sources and official documents, 150 eunuchs were brought by Arab ships and sold in Calcutta, then the capital of British India. It was brought to the notice of the higher offices in Calcutta that out of the 200 emasculated African boys, only ten survived (*Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention: Called by the Committee of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society*, London, 1841). Soon after the proclamation of the abolition of the slave trade in 1820 in the territories of the British Dominion, the British government took stern and effective steps to abolish slavery that was made a criminal offense punishable by British law. However, private advertisements for the sale and purchase of ‘kaffir’ boys continued to appear sporadically in the newspapers.

Today, there is a small village located in the Sarenga block of Bankura district in West Bengal that is inhabited by about 319 Sidi families, with a total population of 1,602 (Population Census 2011). This testifies to the continuing Sidi presence in Bengal.

**Sidis and slavery in native Indian states**

Slavery as an institution was prevalent in the British territories; however, it was also in existence in the native states especially the princely states of Kutch and Kathiawar (Saurashtra) in Western India. These included, among others, the states of Junagadh, Mandvi and Porbandar. J.P. Willoughby was the first political agent to draw attention to it and to provide useful factual data regarding its organisation. He observed young African boys in attendance on the chiefs of Kathiawar and wrote that it was clear that they were imported from outside (Banaji 1932:147). Despite the proclamation of 1837, which abolished slavery, native states carried on a lucrative trade in slaves. To
avoid being confiscated by the authorities at Porbandar, the ships carrying slaves landed at the port of Nawa Bundar and other native ports from whence they eventually arrived in Bombay. Slaves both male and female were in great demand and each fetched anywhere from 60 to 100 rupees (Banaji 1932:149). Under considerable pressure from the British, the rulers of the native states expressed their willingness to suppress the trade, yet slaves continued to arrive illegally. Inspections and confiscation of a vessel arriving at Porbandar in 1835 led to the rescue of seventy-four slaves, of whom forty-four were males and thirty females. Many were concealed in boxes and the holds of the vessels (Ibid.). There are also references in historical records to the nawab of Oudh, another princely state in North India, who is said to have received a gift from a Mughal merchant of three Abyssinian women, seven Abyssinian men and two native girls for which he was paid 20,000 rupees (Asiatic Journal 1831, cited in Pinto 1992:141).

Unfortunately, no reliable statistics are available on the number of slaves in British India prior to 1840 because of the absence of census reports. There can be no doubt, however, that slave trading and slave owning was widespread and that slaves were sought for their labour and their prestige value.

**Sidis in Pakistan**

There is a significant Sidi population in Pakistan today. When the Arabs and Muslims arrived in Sindh in the early eighth century, they came with a large number of slaves. According to other sources, the origin of the Sidis can be traced back to soldiers from East Africa who served in the Muslim armies of Muhammad bin Qasim who conquered Punjab and Sindh in 710 CE. According to some estimates, one quarter of the population of the Makran coast in the southwestern Pakistan is of African ancestry. They are referred to as Sheedi, Siddi, Dada, Syah or Gulam (which means slave) and Naukar (implying servant). Sir Richard Burton, the traveller and linguist who spent some time in the Sindh commented that 700 Bambasi, Habshi and Zangibari were brought to Baluchistan (a part of Pakistan since 1947) every year (Burton 1872).

This population comprising of the offsprings of Makrani men and female Africans, known as Sidiyani, are called Gaddo, meaning half-caste. According to Luis Quintana-Murci, a population geneticist at the Pasteur Institute in France, more than 40 per cent of the maternal gene pool of the Makranis is descended from African ancestors (Quintana-Murci 2011). The Mombasa Street, Lyari and Sheedi Village – three areas in Karachi – are evidence of the African presence in
Pakistan. Other centres of Sidi culture are Tando Bago, a rural community in the Northeast and Badin, an urban area. The majority of the Sheedis in Sindh converted to Islam centuries ago.

The Sidis of Pakistan are organised into four clans or houses: Khara- dar Makan, Hyderabad Makan, Lassi Makan and Belaro Makan. Like their counterparts in India, these people of African descent revere many saints, especially the Sufi saint, Pir Mangho, also known as Mangho Haji Syed Sakhi Sultan who is honoured by his devotees with the annual festival of Pir Mangho. The celebrations consist of performances and sacred songs called Laywa, which are similar to the Lewa found in coastal regions of Oman, thereby drawing our attention to the similarities in, and survivals of African cultural traditions among descendants of Africans in the Indian Ocean world.

One of the early Sidi organisations to be established in Pakistan was Al-Habsh (The Ethiopian) in the mid-1960. In 1972, the association known as Sheedi Community of Kharadar was started in Karachi. Today, there are a number of active groups like the All Sindh Sheedi Welfare Association and the All Sindh Al Habash Jama’at, which serve as welfare associations to promote the well-being of the community.

**Sidis in Sri Lanka**

The slave trade along the Indian Ocean brought Africans to many parts of West and South Asia including Sri Lanka, which has a small population of people of African descent who can still be found there. These Africans were brought to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese (1505–1568), the Dutch (1658–1796) and the British (1796–1948). There is a reference to them as early as the fourteenth century in the writings of Ibn Battuta who wrote, ‘we journeyed thence to the town of Kalanbu (Colombo) where resides the wazir and the ruler of the sea Jalasti, who has with him about 500 Abyssinians serving in his garrison’ (Battuta 1986:260). These descendants of Africans were referred to as Kaffir or Cafrinhas in Portuguese, Kapiriyo in Sinhala and Kapili in Tamil. They served Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist rulers of Sri Lanka in numerous capacities. With the arrival of the Europeans to the island, they also served their Portuguese and later Dutch masters. Based on an eyewitness account, Captain Joao Ribeiro stated in 1586 that the ruler of the kingdom of Sitawaka (located in south-central Sri Lanka), named Rajasinghe I (1581–1593) employed African soldiers in his fighting forces against the Portuguese. Literary works in Sinhalese language, namely poems such as ‘War of the Portuguese’, ‘Parangi Hatana’ and ‘Rajasiha Hatana’ also make references to the Kapiri, a term used
The transportation of African Slaves from the Indian subcontinent to different places along the Indian Ocean coast also brought Africans to the islands of the Maldives. The earliest written reference to the
African presence in the Maldives is from the twelfth century. The Africans must have arrived in the Arab dhows. Ibn Battuta also makes a mention of them in the fourteenth century. During his visit to the Maldives, Battuta visited the ‘Habshigefanu Magan’ the shrine of the worthy African called Shaikh Najib. On the island of Kinalos, Battuta was welcomed by Abd Al-Aziz Makdashawi (the term Makdashawi suggests its origin from Mogadishu in Somalia). The majority of the Africans on the island worked on the coconut plantations. As with other Africans, those of Maldives also preserved their musical traditions. Their music consists of the use of large drums called Bodu beru which are played as accompaniment to the babaru lava or black songs. (For more details, see Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.)

A number of Africans were also sent to the Islands of Mauritius and Seychelles. Thus, Africans settled in many parts of the South Asian continent and have left a strong imprint on these societies.

Notes
1 ‘Nagara’ is the term for drums in the Gujarati language.
2 In Sindh also, the former African slaves fought valiantly against the British. One of them, Hosh Muhammad who rose from slave status to a commander became a martyr defending Sindh (Albinia 2008:54).
4 During the nineteenth century, a large number of Sidis were reported to be living in Bombay near the town prison. According to Census reports, there were an estimated 889 Sidisin 1848, 1,171 in 1872 and 689 ‘Negro Africans’ in 1881 (cited in Freeman-Granville 1988).
Descendants of Africans constituted a vital presence in India, especially during the medieval period. This was specifically the case in the Deccan region where they rose often from slave status to become an influential force in the military administration and in politics. Some of them commanded vast armies and actively recruited other African slaves in their fighting forces. This created a bond based on race and a shared identity. They used their military abilities, administrative skills and reputation for loyalty to exercise real authority; they were mostly de facto rulers. In stark contrast, there were at least two, perhaps three, kingdoms in which Africans exercised formal rule. The states of Janjira and Sachin survived into the twentieth century when they merged into independent India.

Janjira
Along with Sachin, Janjira is one of the two African kingdoms that survived in India until the middle of the twentieth century. It included the towns of Murud and Shrivardhan. It was a stronghold of Sidi power. Known as the island of ‘Habasian’ (land of the African Habshis), Janjira is situated on the western coast of India about forty miles south of Mumbai. It covers an area of about 325 square miles and is a part of Konkan region in the state of Maharashtra. There is no clear consensus about the meaning and origin of the word Janjira. The term *janjira* is said to be a corrupt form of the Arabic *janjrah* meaning island. According to other sources, the term *janjira* is derived from *janjar*, an iron chain employed for launching the ship’s anchor. Others opine that the term comes from the iron chains used to tie the slaves and captives and prevent their escape.

According to Greek writers, the name Janjira (Zanjira) is a relic of the Arab trade with India prior to the Christian era and they referred
to it as Zizerus or Sigendia. Strabo writing in the fifth century BCE refers to Sigerdis on the west coast of India, which according to him was conquered along with Saraostus, possibly a reference to Saurashtra peninsula on the west coast of India (Strabo’s Geography. Translated by H.C Hamilton, 1854–1857).

The history of the Sidis in Janjira is varied both as sailors and as slave traders. They served as the naval guardians of the northwest coast of India and their power lasted until the end of the nineteenth century (Harris 1971:80). The first census of Janjira Island in 1872 reported a total population of 1,700 of which 258 were Sidis (Harris 1971:80). The presence of Sidis in Janjira can be explained by the fact that many of them had enlisted as soldiers and mercenaries in the service of the Bahmani Kingdom of the Deccan (1347–1489) and from there found their way to Janjira. However, legendary accounts are more colourful and according to them in the year 1489, an Abyssinian disguised as a merchant sought permission to land his valuable merchandise on the island comprising of 300 boxes. Each of the boxes contained an Abyssinian soldier and through this act of deception, Sidis acquired control over the island fortress of Janjira (Banaji 1932.)

Long before the Sidis gained control over Janjira, it served as a base for Abyssinian merchants, especially the village of Rajpuri. The latter was ruled by the sultans of Gujarat who recruited Sidis as naval chiefs to monitor and control Portuguese activities and ambitions. Their apprehensions were justifiable for in 1521 the Portuguese attempted to annex Jafarabad, located in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat, but were unsuccessful. In 1535, they took over the island of Diu where they built a fort and used it as their base. Janjira subsequently came under the control of the wazir of the Bahmani sultan who recruited Sidis for his military and his administration. According to the existing accounts, he is said to have appointed Sidi Yaqut Khan as his thanedar or admiral at Danda Rajpuri (Jasdanwalla, ‘Sidi Kingdom of Janjira’ in Robbins 1983:177). For his services, Yakut Khan received one-third of the Surat revenues. He is said to have owned a large number of slaves and followers and played a decisive part in the political conflicts at Surat. Yakut Khan also confronted the British and took control over the fort of Mazgaon (Ibid.)

For more than three centuries Janjira and Danda Rajpuri were under the control of the Sidis who formed the aristocracy of Janjira. The history of Janjira is one of endemic rivalry and struggle for power between the Sidi Sardars or chiefs and the nawabs. The first nawab or ruler was Sidi Ambar the Little (1621–1642). In 1618, Siddi Sural
Khan was appointed the governor of Janjira. Two years later he was succeeded by Yakut Khan who in turn was succeeded by Siddi Ambar, known as ‘snake cobra’ and not to be confused with his namesake who ruled Ahmadnagar. In 1636, when the Mughals conquered the Konkan, they gave the region to their ally, the sultan of Bijapur, who confirmed Siddi Ambar as the governor of Janjira and assigned him the responsibility to protect the pilgrims and trade from the pirates.

Ambar is said to have been born in the Kambata region of Southern Ethiopia and was named ‘Chapu’. At a young age he was sold in Mocha, a Red Sea port and taken to Baghdad where he was once again sold (Mamdani 2013:9). Siddi Ambar rose from being a slave to become the wazir (minister) of Ahmadnagar. He emerged as a powerful leader due to his abilities and brilliant administrative and military skills. He is credited with developing a unique form of guerrilla warfare called *bargi-giri*, which he taught his soldiers. Under his leadership, the Sidis became a formidable naval power. Malik Ambar died in 1626. He will be remembered in the annals of Indian history as the best-known and most powerful son of Africa. His remarkable rise from the status of a slave to the de facto ruler of Ahmadnagar represents a unique and unparalleled example in the African diaspora. Not content to exercise power only in the Deccan, Ambar aspired to integrate his family into the royalty and attain status as nobility. He accomplished this by marrying his daughter into the Nizam Shahi family as the wife of Sultan Murtaza II, while his son Fateh Khan married the daughter of the noble, Yakut Khan. It should be stated that while the chiefs of Janjira were fully conscious of their African ancestry, they nevertheless did not identify with other Sidi communities.

In 1666, after Aurangzeb invaded the Bijapur Sultanate, the Sidis of Janjira acknowledged Mughal sovereignty. They received payment for protecting and safeguarding the subjects of the Mughal kings from piracy. During the reign of Aurangzeb (1658–1707), Janjira’s Yakut Khan was said to have been paid a sum of one lakh and fifty thousand rupees from the treasury to protect the ships of Surat (Danda Rajpur). (For more details, see *Mirat Ahmadi: A Persian History of Gujarat*, edited by Ali Muhammad Khan, 1965:281–282.) Another Sidi, Hafez Masud Khan served at Surat as the lieutenant of Sidi Yakut Khan, the hereditary admiral of the Mughal fleet. According to the Mirati-Ahmadi, Masud Khan Habsi was given one-third of the revenues of Surat for his services (Ibid. 714). He is said to have owned a large number of Habshi slaves and played a vital role in the political conflicts in Surat. He later declared himself the master of the castle after forcing Saiyid Achhan to surrender his powers to him. In 1670, Shivaji attacked
the fort of Janjira but with help from the Mughals, it was saved and the Maratha sailors suffered heavy casualties in this naval war.

In 1671–1672, Sidi Sumbul was appointed admiral of the Imperial Mughal Navy and under his leadership the Sidis fought many naval battles against the Marathas. In the middle of the seventeenth century, a number of Sidi admirals such as Siddi Kasam and Siddi Sambal were appointed as commanders of the Mughal fleet. Though Shivaji successfully conquered much of Konkan, he was not successful in bringing Janjira under his permanent suzerainty. Later the Sidis also came in conflict with the British and defeated the latter in the first military encounters. Thus, for most of the seventeenth century, the Sidis were engaged in military and naval battles with the Marathas, the Mughals and the British. The Sidis were said to be preparing for an invasion of Bombay in the late seventeenth century and for this purpose had recruited a force of over 8,000 men and their entire naval fleet (Banaji 1932:41). This presented a clear threat to the British as evidenced from a communication from Surat to the Deputy Governor of Bombay dated 30 June 1690 which states ‘He [the Sidi] has shown us an example and taught us otherwise than to think ourselves secure when we are not, therefore, hereafter we ought to be more vigilant and careful and endeavor to strengthen ourselves on that island’ (quoted in Banaji 1932:43). Under their leader Sidi Yakut, the Sidi forces took possession of Janjira and confiscated British weapons and money.

In 1733, the British ended the hostilities and entered into a treaty of friendship and alliance with the Sidis. The Sidis also gained possession over Jafarabad, on the southern coast of Kathiawar in 1759. There is an interesting account of how Jafarabad came under Sidi control in the official records or the Gazetteer of Kolaba district. According to it, in 1731, one Turk Patel and other Koli landowners of Jafarabad committed a crime near Surat. They were seized by Sidi Hilal who had the responsibility of protecting the shipping and trade at Surat. Since the accused were unable to pay for their release, they instead offered the port of Jafarabad, which came under the possession of the Sidis. The British authorities anxious to secure the Sidis as their allies in the quest to overthrow the Portuguese and gain control over the Marathas appointed Sidi Hilal the faujdar or protector of Jafarabad (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Kolaba District Vol. 1, revised edition 1964).

The period from 1762 to 1772 was a decade of instability and internal disorder in Janjira during which the Sidis, Marathas and the English fought for control of the island. In 1834 the British Government declared Janjira to be subject to the British power, thus establishing
their supremacy. However, skirmishes and disputes continued between the two. Finally in 1869, the nawab of Janjira was stripped of his control over criminal jurisdiction and a British political officer was appointed to oversee the political affairs of the State (Ibid. 4).

Immediately following India’s independence in 1947, Janjira was merged in the Indian Union Territory and the nawab was given a pension but left with little power.

**Fort of Janjira**

The fortified island of Janjira lies just within the entrance of the Rajpuri creek. It is oval in shape and is surrounded by walls. On the east side, opposite Rajpuri there is a large entrance gateway with steps leading to the water and on the west facing the open sea is a small gate leading up to a masonry platform. Around the walls and the bastions are guns for protection and defense of the fort. ‘Once the fort boasted of five hundred canons, today only a handful are left, still intact and able to tell their story. Amongst them are the three major cannons, Kalal Bangdi, Landa Kasam, and Bhavani, the cherished weapons of the Sidis, built from five metals’ (Jaide, D, ‘Sidis (Seydis): The African Kingdoms in India’, 2008).

The fort at Janjira served as a formidable bastion against potential enemies. The fort also served as the residence of the nawab and his family and other dependents, as well as some Koli families, descendants of the original inhabitants of the island. In 1866, a large portion of the interior section of the fortress was destroyed by fire; however, many of the houses have been rebuilt and restored.

The Sidis who arrived prior to the spread of Islam were absorbed into the local populations particularly among the sailing and seafaring communities. Occasionally, one can still observe African physical features among certain members of the Kolis, Kanbis and other seafaring communities. While the Sidis have adopted local dialects and can speak corrupt Hindi, traces of Bantu languages can also be detected. Further linguistic research on this could yield valuable insights on the subject of linguistic survival.

The Sidis were, thus, a powerful presence on the island of Janjira. With the establishment of the Mughal Empire, many of the Sidis engaged in piratical activities and the plundering of ships in the Indian Ocean. With the emergence and growth of Maratha power under Shivaji, the Sidis of Janjira became a problem for the Marathas. They were a powerful force to contend with in the wars between Shivaji and the Mughals and later the rivalry and ambitions
of the British and the Marathas (for more on the Anglo-Maratha relations, 1785–1796 see Abdulaziz Lodhi, ‘African Settlements in India’ in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 1992, Volume 1 (1): 83–86). In their rivalry with the Marathas, the Sidis were compelled to seek the protection of the British who regarded the Sidis as a counterforce to the Marathas.

The Sidis of Janjira ruled over the island until 1948. During this time, they issued copper, silver and gold coins, the earliest of which were issued by Sidi Ibrahim Khan II (1789–1792 and 1804–1826). One of the coins in widespread usage among these was a rupee issued by the Sidi rulers of Janjira known as ‘habshi nishani rupaya’, meaning the rupee which was identified as Habshi (Bhandare 2006:199–200). His successor Sidi Muhammed Khan issued a copper paisa (penny) and, during the rule of Sidi Ibrahim Khan II (1848–1879), a beautiful coin was issued by him. The etchings on some of these coins read, ‘Habshi of Janjira’– an acknowledgement of their African ancestry (Bhandare 2006:198–199).

The issuing of these coins by the Sidi rulers of Janjira and the inclusion of the word ‘habshi’ on them attests to their autonomous powers and their strong identification with their African heritage. In 1892, the British government conferred on Nawab Siddi Ahmad Khan, the title of ‘Knight Commander of the Indian Empire’.

**Sachin**

The state of Sachin was established in 1791 by Sidi Mohammed Abd al-Karim of Janjira, popularly known as Balu Miyan who was given the title of nawab. It was a small kingdom comprising twenty villages, much of it falling into the present Surat district on the west coast of Gujarat. Located near Surat and with easy access to the sea, it was an independent state controlled by the Sidis. The rulers of Sachin entered into matrimonial alliances with the other princely states of Gujarat such as Cambay and Janjira. In 1948, the nawab of Sachin signed an agreement, which resulted in its merger with Bombay State.

**Jaunpur**

The descendants of Africans also played a central role in North India during the medieval period. In the last few years of the fourteenth century, a number of provincial sultanates flourished in Northern India – one of which was the kingdom of Jaunpur, an important provincial capital of the Tughlaq Empire. The Jaunpur Sultanate, an independent
Three Sidi Kingdoms in India

The kingdom in what is present-day Uttar Pradesh was founded by Firuz Shah Tughlaq in 1360 CE. During the declining years of the Tughlaq Dynasty (1394–1479), Jaunpur was ruled by the Sharqis. Historians of medieval India like R.C. Majumdar and Wolseley Haig have put forward the view that the Sharqis were of African descent (Saeed 1972:53). Malik Sarwar, a eunuch and former slave of Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq, who extended his authority over Oudh, founded the sultanate of Jaunpur. In 1394, he declared himself the ruler and ruled the kingdom until 1403.

Malik Sarwar’s kingdom included Bihar, Bundelkhand and Bhopal. He is credited with the building, repairing and redesigning of several old buildings, the best known of which is the Badi Manzil, which formerly served as a palace. He is also credited with the building of many canals and mosques. Sarwar assumed the title of Atabak-i-Azam (the greatest lord) and even struck coins in his name (Saeed 1972:33). Malik Sarwar’s adopted son, Malik Mubarak Quranfal, also an Abyssinian slave and said to be a water carrier, declared his independence and assumed power. The sultanate lasted for just a century, but during this period the Sharqis made significant political, cultural and religious contributions. They also left a lasting legacy through their patronage of art, architecture and religious learning.

The powerful kingdoms of Delhi, Malwa and Bengal surrounded the kingdom of Jaunpur. Despite the constant impending threat of invasions from their enemies, the Sharqi rulers engaged in peaceful pursuits and prolific building activities. These include a number of forts, notable being the Karar Kot (now in ruins, but still an imposing building), the fort of Rai Bareilly built by Sultan Ibrahim and the fort of Dalman. Among the mosques, the best known is the Atala Mosque built in 1430 on the site of the former temple of Atala Devi; Jhanjri Mosque, said to be built by Sultan Ibrahim; and the Masjid-i-Kalam, also known as Jami’u’l Sharq built by Sultan Husain Shah Sharqi in 1479, who was the last of the Sharqi rulers. Thus, Sharqi rule was a period of prolific architectural activities.

Saeed rightly points out that Jaunpur was not only the site of tombs, palaces, forts and mosques but also attracted men of learning – saints and Sufis. The poet Kabir and the mystic from Syria, Shah Mader both are said to have resided in Jaunpur. It became known as Dar-u’l-Aman, the abode of peace (Ibid. 53). During the rule of the Sharqis, scholars, artists, craftsmen and religious thinkers sought refuge in Jaunpur, especially, when Timur attacked Delhi. They contributed to the artistic and religious life of the state. Sadly, when Sikandar Lodi (1489–1517) invaded Jaunpur, he destroyed many of the buildings.
It is clear from the above account that the independent kingdoms of Janjira, Jaunpur and Sachin attest to the power and military and administrative skills of the descendants of Africans in India. They are also a testament to the fact that in India, some Africans rose from their humble origins as slaves, sailors and soldiers to become the rulers of powerful kingdoms that survived and flourished until modern times.

Notes

1 At first, the rulers of the State held the title of wazir, but after 1803, the British Raj recognised the title of nawab.
2 Many of the more recent nawabs of Janjira were educated at Rajkumar College, Rajkot with other young men from the Indian princely states.
3 According to the Census of 1941, Janjira had a population of 103,557 with the majority of its citizens being Hindus. An earlier census carried out in 1901 showed that of the total population of Janjira fort of 1,620, the Sidis comprised 240. Government of India, Imperial Gazetteer 1908–1909, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 59–61.
4 The term ‘Kot’ stands for a fort.
A popular Yoruba proverb says, ‘A river that forgets its source dries up.’ This saying applies to all migrants who must face the challenge of retaining their original culture while constructing a new identity in their adopted homeland. The cultural history of the Sidis is unique. It was possible for voluntary migrants who resettled in distant lands to preserve and perpetuate their culture of origin. In contrast, the Africans in India and slaves elsewhere were uprooted from their motherland and encountered greater obstacles. There was less scope for them to retain, preserve and continue their inherited African traditions in a distant land in an entirely different social and cultural environment. Furthermore, their assimilation was made more difficult because they were few in numbers and therefore they went through a gradual process of socialisation as individuals, not as a cohesive community.

It is essential to stress that the Sidis do not represent a homogeneous group. They came from different regions in Africa and that their ancestors were not always slaves. Even those who were descended from slaves, found themselves scattered in various parts of South Asia. Some settled in Gujarat, while others in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Sindh (Pakistan) and Sri Lanka. According to Helene Basu 1993, the largest number settled in Sindh (Pakistan). The extent of assimilation into the local culture varied depending on whether they settled in rural or urban areas. In Gujarat where Sidis are scattered all over the state, they are generally to be found in towns and cities while those in Karnataka are mostly found in the forested regions of North Kanara and in Andhra Pradesh they are mainly concentrated in Hyderabad.

Perhaps, the greatest obstacle to the continuation of African culture in their new homeland was the fact that their ancestors came from different parts of Africa — Egypt, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan to Mozambique, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Malawi and Congo. Furthermore, they came from diverse ethnic, linguistic, racial and religious
backgrounds. Despite these differences and the pervasive influence of the dominant culture, the Sidis have preserved certain cultural traits and religious traditions that will be discussed in the following pages.

The process of the revival of African religions and cultural traditions was initiated mainly after the liberation of slaves following the proclamations that prohibited the slave trade. This resulted in the establishment of Sidi settlements in Gujarat. On the other hand, the non-slave Sidi colonies consisting of ten to thirty families who had voluntarily settled in the coastal areas with other seafaring communities were far more successful in preserving the African culture of their ancestors. They may have served as a model and a source of inspiration to the liberated slave settlements.

Religious heritage and survivals

The descendants of Africans in India adopted the religions of the people among whom they lived. Sidis can be Hindus, as in Karnataka and Christians in the Portuguese territories of Goa. The majority of them, especially in Gujarat became Muslims, identifying mainly with Sufism. The Sufi tradition is one of the most liberal traditions within Islam. The Sidis embraced the Sufi traditions and have immense faith in the teachings of the Sufi saints. Their ancestors in Africa had become converts to Islam in the centuries when Islam spread beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia to the African continent. According to traditions, one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, Pegambar Sahib, was Hazrat Bilal, who is said to be of Ethiopian origin. Sidis claim to be descended from him and regard themselves as the inheritors of the Sufi tradition. Since that time many Ethiopians (Abyssinians) also became followers of Sufism. This sect that is different from the Islamic school of Sufi tradition is referred to as Black (African) Sufism. Sufi worship centres primarily on the ‘Dargahs’ or shrines of these saints and there are numerous shrines or dargahs in Sidi localities in Gujarat (including Saurashtra and Kutch), as well as in Sindh.

The Sidis have immense faith in Baba Ghor who is their most revered Pir or saint. The name Baba Ghor has its origins in Arabic in which it means revered master of deep meditation. He was said to have been given this name after he travelled to Mecca and Southern Iraq where he studied with the Rifa’i Sufis (Jayasuriya 2008:102). The Rifa’i is a Sufi order founded by Ahmed ar-Rifa’i in the twelfth century in Iraq, which later spread to Egypt and Syria.

In India, Baba Ghor also referred to as Bava Ghor was a pioneer of the agate (Akik) industry and later turned into a Sufi mystic. According
to available sources, his real name was Mubarak Nubi (‘Nubi’ derived possibly from Nubia, which was located in Upper Egypt) and he was believed to have been a military leader during the reign of Mahmud Ghori (1175–1206) from where he may have acquired the name Baba Ghor. He may have originally come to India from Afghanistan and settled in the vicinity of Rajpipla in Gujarat. There are racial similarities between the Sidis and the Bhils of Rajpipla, which suggests racial admixture and assimilation. In Rajpipla, Baba Ghor established an agate workshop and participated in the prosperous and successful trade in agate beads especially in *tasbihs* or Islamic prayer beads.

The Portuguese traveller Duarte Barbosa wrote in 1515 that the beads and other products of Baba Ghor and his daughter Mai Mar­yam were famous and sought after all over the world (*Book of Duarte Barbosa*. Translated by M.L. Dames, London, 1918).

**African Sufi traditions**

During the course of migration and the gradual process of settling in a new cultural and religious milieu, all religions need to adopt and compromise with the local traditions, in order to survive and flourish. This was equally true for Islam as practiced by the descendants of Africans who settled in India. This Sufi tradition of Islam as followed by the Sidis differs somewhat from the Sufi practices in Africa and the Middle East.

As stated earlier, Sufism represents the mystical tradition in Islam. Its origins can be traced back to the holy Q’uran and the Hadith, though Sufism was also greatly shaped and influenced by the non-Arab cultures of Turkey, Persia and the African continent. Even among the Arab lands, Iraq and Egypt became the centres of the Sufi philosophy and practice. Between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries, four major Sufi orders were introduced into India. These were the *Chishtiya, Subhawardiya, Naqshbandiya* and the *Qadriya*. During the course of its evolution and development, Sufism often came in direct conflict and confrontation with orthodox Islam and many Sufi saints and mystics were martyred for their perceived heretical views. While there developed numerous orders of Sufis, they all professed their unity and oneness with Allah and their absolute absorption in God.

In the past according to tradition, only those Sufis who belonged to the Sayyid sect were known as Pirs, however, in Saurashtra and Guj­arat any individual who acquired certain occult and mystical powers or became associated with the performance of some miracles (called chamatkars) to benefit humanity were revered as Pirs. Sufism also
shares many similarities with the Bhakti cult or the devotional aspect of Hinduism.

It is important to point out that while Sidis claim to follow Sufism, their religious practices and beliefs are not identical to those of Sufis elsewhere. While the Sufi faith in the Middle East promoted restraint, piety and a life of denial of the material world, Sufi practices among the Sidis leaned towards ecstatic and emotionally charged rituals. Sidi fakirs or religious mendicants are sometimes referred to as mastana, implying men possessed by divine ecstasy.

The Sidis of Saurashtra who embraced Islam, nonetheless, preserved their ancestral African practices such as spirit possession, and amalgamated these beliefs into their practices of Sufism. Thus, the veneration of African saints became quite popular among the Sidis. Along with this, the Sidis also borrowed some of the local practices, namely the use of amulets, talismans and charms to ward off evil (ta'wiz).

The African Sufic tradition was a gift of the preeminent Hazrat Bilal, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad and said to be the first muezzin who called the faithful to prayer. The Sidis perceive themselves to be the descendants and inheritors of the spiritual tradition of Hazrat Bilal. Baba Ghor was a follower of this Sufic tradition and spread it among the Sidis who settled in Gujarat and Saurashtra. Thus, while the descendants of the African slaves in the Americas kept their religion alive by merging their African deities with the Christian God, the Sidis in India preserved their religion through amalgamation of the African spirits with the Sufi saints.

Baba Ghor shrines also served as a refuge for runaway African slaves who wanted to escape the oppression of their masters and who found solace and the company of their own people (Basu 2004). Thus, the shrines served as an arena for cultural survivals and African retentions.

The history of the Sidis is lost in time. Their only link to the past is their music and dance dedicated to Baba Ghor along with the other saints and their religious observances and practices in the Dargahs. There are shrines throughout Gujarat to commemorate the places where he stayed before eventually settling in the Bharuch district.

Dargah worship

In seeking to define true Islam, there has been an ongoing debate in terms of the opposition between mosque-centred worship versus Dargah-centred worship. The Sidis of Saurashtra, Kutch and Gujarat mostly identify with the latter position. They tend to emphasise the Dargah tradition of worship.
The present tradition of Dargah worship and religious practice among the Sidis is based on the Sufic cult of Islam, but its roots may lie deeply buried in the beliefs and practices of ancient Egyptian civilisation, especially the worship of the departed souls. The Egyptians believed that in order to attain immortality and to prosper in the other world, the physical body had to be preserved in a tomb. The Sidis believe that the soul of the saint is eternal and resides in or near the Dargah. The blessings of the saints are beneficial and remove obstacles. These ritual powers exercised by the saints and the ancestors are called *karamat* (miracles or supernatural acts of wonder).

For Sidis, the Dargah of Baba Ghor is a holy place where Allah can be experienced or revealed. It is also a place where rituals and religious practices can be carried out. Sidis firmly believe that Dargahs are repositories of powerful spiritual vibrations and power and that pirs and saints can perform miracles, or chamatkar as they phrased it, and are endowed with healing and curative powers. The Sidis especially revere Baba Ghor and his first Dargah was established in the village of Ratanpur near Zaghadia. There is a popular story relating to the origin of Baba Ghor’s tomb according to which, centuries ago the goddess Makhan Devi resided on a hill near Ratanpur. On this site there was a lamp that shed continuous light and was fed by fifty pounds of butter. Its illumination was so powerful that the Prophet in Mecca delegated Baba Ghor to investigate its source. On his arrival, Makhan Devi lost her powers and sank under the ground while Baba Ghor began to perform miracles. Local residents claim that once there existed a pond here, which contained ghee or clarified butter, where even now women are unable to obtain water. According to a legend, even the tigers obeyed his orders. A tree adjacent to his tomb is used in the performance of ordeals (Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Vol. 9, 1901:363). This legend conveys the efficacy of Baba Ghor’s powers and the replacement of local superstitions and faith in the indigenous goddess with Islam and the spiritual powers of Baba Ghor. There are many legends associated with Baba Ghor and the site of his grave. In addition to the performance of ordeals here, the popular belief is that those guilty of theft or other crimes are proven innocent or guilty. There are also other numerous shrines dedicated to Nagarchi Baba, as well as the Dargah of Mai Mishra and Baba Ghor’s other sisters. Among the Sidis, usually the tomb or Dargah of a male saint can only be entered by men, and the tombs of women saints were restricted to women.

The shrines of Baba Ghor and other Sufi saints have become places of veneration not just for the Sidis but also for Hindus, Bhils,
Christians and Zoroastrians who come here drawn by the mystical powers of the local saints. In the hamlets of Gujarat where Sidis live adjacent to the Bhils, an Indian tribal group, there is considerable economic and religious interaction. In times of illness or calamities, both groups are known to call upon each other’s ritual specialists. There are also instances of intermarriage between the two communities (Basu 1993:64). This represents the assimilative forces at work in Indian society. This is also an indication that pir worship transcends religious and secular divisions. Despite these assimilative tendencies, the Sidis as followers of holy saints or pirs sometimes encounter criticism by, and find themselves in conflict with, more orthodox Muslims such as tabliq jamaat who oppose the worship of pirs.

In the Gir forest of Saurashtra in Jambur, and in Sidi villages on the Gulf of Kutch and elsewhere, the Dhamal dance is performed at the site of the Dargah on the first and the twelfth day of the Islamic calendar. Urs celebrations are held in Surat near the Dargah of Mai Bharosi (Bharauchi, originally from Bharuch) and in Jamnagar in Northern Saurashtra. Normally, during this occasion, a male goat which is of one colour is sacrificed. When the body of the goat starts shaking, known as Dhanghod, it is seen as a sign of the arrival of the spirit after which the animal is slaughtered and ritually sacrificed.

Gupta provides a description of the annual celebration called Urs-Sharif at Jambur that venerates Baba Ghor. The annual fair or celebration held at Jambur attracts a large number of participants, averaging 5,000 to 6,000 (Gupta 1991: 219). The nawab of Junagadh is said to have given a gift of agricultural land for use by the Sidi community, the revenues from it being utilised for the Urs festival. According to Gupta this celebration involves participants walking on a pit of burning coal after drinking ‘enchanted water’. The enchanted water, a blessing from the Pir is said to have magical qualities that enable the participants to walk on the hot fire without getting burnt (Ibid. 220).

While many of the Sidis claim to be Sunnis of the Hanafi School, others claim allegiance to the Shia sect. The Sidis of Saurashtra observe Muharram to commemorate the death of Imam Husain and the massacre of Karbala. The Sidis observe this day by participating in the procession known as, Taziya, particularly in Jambur, Talala, Jamnagar, Rajkot and other places.

In the holy month of Ramazan, many Sidis like other Muslims observe the month-long fast or roza and celebrate the end of fasting as ‘Id’ marked by joyful celebrations, special foods and delicacies and gift giving. During the holy month, Sidis give alms to fakirs. Sidis also celebrate the festivals of Id-e-Milad and Bakra Eid. Those who have
completed the pilgrimage to Mecca sacrifice a goat during the latter festival. Like their fellow Muslims, the Sidis also observe certain practices relating to death. The most important of these is the reading of fatia also known as jaarat.

**Role of ancestors**

African religious beliefs and practices are diverse and reflect the ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity on the continent. Despite this, there are some underlying similarities especially in their reverence for deceased ancestors and their attitude towards the land, both being viewed as sacred and as vital links between the living, the dead and the yet to be born (Mbiti 1969). Africans recognised and acknowledged a link between the life of the individual and that of the community. There prevailed the common belief that following death, the soul of the deceased remained for quite some time in a state of flux. They believed that it was essential to carry out rituals and ceremonies to appease the spirit of the dead and lay it to rest or else it may cause harm or create disharmony.

Numerous rituals were directed towards this end. This practice appears to have survived among the descendants of the Africans in India. This reverence for deceased ancestors has been wrongly called ‘ancestor-worship’; however, it is based on the premise that the spirits of the departed elders continue to influence the lives of the living and must be adequately appeased and placated so they may actively intervene on behalf of the living and bring prosperity, good health, progeny and success. Illness, misfortune, death and natural calamities are signs of their neglect and consequent disaffection and must be countered by propitiation and sacrifices for the dead.

In India, the descendants of the Africans continued their age-old traditions of venerating deceased ancestors, an integral and essential element of indigenous African beliefs and practices. The latter held that ancestors served as mediators between the physical and the spiritual worlds, the living community and the sacred universe. They were powerful forces and when invoked could bestow the living with the blessings of health, long life, children, fertility and prosperity. Thus, many shrines were dedicated in the Sidi communities to these revered ancestors. In keeping with African traditions, the descendants of Africans in India also maintained household shrines for the ancestors. In Karnataka, these shrines included coconuts placed on pedestals (Obeng 2003:112). Obeng goes on to explain that in Karnataka the descendants of Africans participate in a ritual called hiriyaru. This mostly takes
place in the month of November and consists of puja or prayers for the deceased elders of the community. Unlike Hindus who perform shradhha to enable the soul to attain eternal peace, the Karnataka Afro-Indians do not send the dead away, but rather invite their presence among the living. For them death is not the source of ritual pollution and defilement as among the Hindus, but rather the incorporation of the deceased in the world of the living (Obeng 2007:186). The Karnataka Hindu Africans, who previously buried their dead, have now adopted the practice of cremating the deceased, much like their fellow Hindus. This shows the assimilative tendencies in their religious practices.

The cult of spirit possession

The cult of spirit possession prevalent among the Sidis may also have African origins. The ceremony or ritual of spirit possession is referred to as ‘mukti’ by the Sidis. The evil spirits are exorcised from the possessed individual who is thereby made free. This is known as valgad or vai. It takes place during the celebration of Vrush, particularly among the Sidis of Bedi near Jamnagar, at which time a goat is sacrificed. This is called bakra no balidan. When the body of the goat starts trembling and shaking (they refer to it as ‘dhandod nakhwa’ or ‘dhrujari darshave’), it is believed that the spirit has come to attend the sacred ceremony and to bless the community. Thereafter the goat is ritually slaughtered. During the ceremony, verses from the Q’uran and devotional songs based on Sufi tradition are recited accompanied by musical instruments. The title words of the songs sung in Bedi are in Swahili whereas in other Sidi communities the words are from the Somali language. The songs sung by the women folk are known as jinjari among the Sidis of Bedi area of Jamnagar.

The practice of spirit possession among the Sidis, thus, shows many similarities with those found among the Indians. Common to both is the belief that saints (among the Sidis) and the female goddess, ‘mata’ (among the Hindus), take possession of the victim or the afflicted individual who more often than not is a female. My informant referred to this phenomenon as savari, implying the possession of the victim who becomes the vehicle of the spirit (Interview with Rumanaben, 13 May 2012). The possessed falls into a trance, referred to in Gujarati as ‘dhune chhe’. During the course of this trance-like state, the afflicted speaks incoherently and demonstrates unusual behaviour accompanied by trembling and shaking. Once the evil spirit has been exorcised or the goddess has left the body, the individual is restored and may become endowed with special powers.
The traditional healing rituals practiced by rural Indians as also among the Sidis were intended to exorcise evil spirits and are referred to as bhagat bhoova. These beliefs are an integral part of tribal rituals in Africa as well as in India. The use of herbal medicines to cure sickness and disease is widely prevalent among the Sidis and also reflects their profound and extensive knowledge of the medicinal value of various plants and animals. This knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another and forms the basis of their healing practices.

In Pakistan, a commonly practiced ritual among the Sidis is gwati, a ritual involving exorcism and healing. Women, supposedly possessed by a jinn or an evil spirit, are taken to exorcists who are often women. The ritual involves the sacrifice of a goat whose blood is smeared on the forehead of the afflicted. The healing ritual is followed by an elaborate meal, which reinforces the community’s active participation in the well-being of the individual. This is very reminiscent of traditional healing practices on the African continent.

Many of the religious beliefs and practices of the Sidis are syncretic and reflect the incorporation and assimilation of African beliefs with the practices of Islam. They are centred on the five pillars of Islam and the cult of Dargah worship.

**Rites and rituals**

Sidis follow the Muslim calendar, which commences with the Hizari (Hijrah) or the migration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE.

The religious rites and rituals of the Sidis evolved in the African Sufic tradition and include the Dargah worship of Baba Ghor, Nagarchi Baba, Mai Mishra and Mai-Magharu and pilgrimage to Baba Ghor’s tomb in the Rajpur Hill in Bharuch district in south Gujarat. It includes the observing of vows near the Dargah of Baba Ghor and the religious ceremony conducted after the fulfilment of the vows. Singing of devotional songs and chanting of zikaris comprise an important component. In addition, the Sidis celebrate the festival of Urs, engage in ceremonies including animal sacrifices and participate in the devotional Dhamal dance.

As followers of Islam, the Sidis are required to participate in namaz, worship in the mosque five times a day. The namaz performed in the morning is known as ‘Fajr Namaz’, that of the noon as ‘Zuhr Namaz’, namaz in the afternoon as ‘Asr Namaz’, later in the evening as ‘Maghribi Namaz’ and the last namaz as ‘Isha’. Most Sidis, however, do not
adhere rigidly to the five daily prayers. While all devout Muslims are expected to go on a pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca, in reality, only rarely can the Sidis practice this due to their widespread poverty and adverse economic conditions.

Sacred dances

An indispensable part of Sidi cultural and religious life, the Dhamal was performed near the Dargah on auspicious occasions and to mark the fulfilment of vows. The term Dhamal is derived from the word damama and is an energetic and vigorous expression of devotion to Baba Ghor. It incorporates fast movements and bodily vibrations, dramatic facial expressions accompanied by chants and songs in praise of Allah and Baba Ghor. These dances represent the ecstatic and rhythmic dance traditions of the African continent with Sufi mystical elements. The Dhamal, a term derived from the Indian Sufi tradition is a sacred dance form and cannot be performed without purifactory rituals and adherence to proper rules. Previously, the participants adorned their bodies with animal skins, but now the upper body is adorned with body paint. The turban on the head is decorated with feathers of birds (often peacock) and the dancers hold a fan of bird feathers in their hands.

The musicians and chanters generally occupy seats in the centre and sing devotional songs known as Zinkari or Jikar, which are an accompaniment to the dances, and invoke the theme of the hunter and the hunted. The song goes:

‘Jumbo jumbo re’
‘Shana re’

The word jumbo is a Swahili word that is commonly used in East Africa as a term of greeting. Its incorporation in Sidi dance and song points to cultural survivals among the Sidis. The lead singer, often a female sings these lines and the dancers repeat the words ‘shana shana re’.

The music and songs of the Sidis frequently invoke their places of origin in Africa. In the course of a dance performance in Hyderabad by Afro-Indians known as chaush, Barbara Thompson identified the song lyrics as being in the Shambaa language from Tanzania (Alpers 1997:12). More recent evidence comes from the work of ethnomusicologists Amy Catlin and Nazir Jairazbhoy who have recorded and documented the songs and dances of the Sidis in Gujarat.
Personal and family names also provide tantalising clues to their African origins and connections with a real or imaginary homeland. Thus, the songs and dances of the Sidis represent the cultural knowledge of their African heritage.

Another song/dance routine observed in the village of Bedi in Jamnagar goes as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Han, han re Sidi, jara nacho to sahi} \\
\text{jara nacho to sahi, tuje meri kasam} \\
\text{han han re habsi, jara nacho to sahi} \\
\text{jara nacho to sahi, tuje meri kasam.}
\end{align*}
\]

Translated into English, these words state:

Go ahead you Sidi, go ahead and dance
I beseech you, to go ahead and dance.
Go ahead you Habshi, go on and dance
I beseech you to go ahead and dance.

Another verse commonly recited in their dance goes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{bava gorisa dula jhande pe vari jaun,} \\
\text{Aambli uper nishan jhande pe vari jaun.}
\end{align*}
\]

(The dance concludes with the verse: this is the truth that there is no God but Allah.)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hakla illaha laha, haklai la.}
\end{align*}
\]

Yet another song that is repeated over and over states:

‘Mana simbasim pore pore, Allah allahsim pore pore.’
(‘In my mind, there is no other name but that of Allah and his prophet.’)

African musical instruments, drums and wind blowers accompany these dances. The dance is climaxed by the chant of ‘Sidi ka baccha sher barabar’ (The son of a Sidi is equal to a lion). The tempo and speed of the dance rapidly increases climaxing in an ecstatic state. During this time, there often occurs nazrana, the showering of money or rupees. During the ceremony of Urs, a goat is first sacrificed and its meat is cooked for a ceremonial feast.
A song of the Sidis involves a main singer and a chorus and goes thus:

‘Le Le Lonkdi!’
The chorus says: ‘Leti-Ja!’
‘Patel na Chibhda!’
The chorus says: ‘Khati ja’.
Translated into English, this goes as follows:
‘Hey you fox’
The chorus says: ‘take it, take it!’
‘Farmer’s squash’
The chorus says: ‘eat it, eat it!’

The dance movements stress rhythm and percussion and incorporate imitations of animals and birds (Bhajgotar 2008:97). These dances are a demonstration of their strength, control over their bodies and often incorporate strange facial expressions and are accompanied by hokara or deep sounds like ‘ho, ho’. The Dhamal dance of the Sidis shares certain similarities with the Tandava Nritya of Shiva and the tribal dances of Chhotanagpur and Indrajani Dalu (literally branches of Indra’s tree) performed among the Bhils of Panchmahal area and its bordering areas of Madhya Pradesh. Other dances of the Sidis include a devotional one known as Jabalo. According to Lobo, in Kanara, there is a popular dance among the Sidis called phoogdi or fugdi in which only women participate (cited by Baptiste 1998:119). Other Sidi dances include ‘balo’, ‘leva’, ‘bandugia’, ‘channogi’ and ‘damali’ (Chauhan 1995:245).

In recent years, the Dhamal dance form has gained wider popularity outside of India and been transformed into a form of cultural entertainment and expression of pride in Sidi heritage.

**Sidi Goma**

The Sidi dances are referred to as Goma. The word goma has its origins in the Swahili word ngoma, meaning drums. This form of Sidi entertainment is gaining widespread popularity and Sidi troupes perform this at celebrations both in India and overseas. It generally consists of twelve participants (eight dancers and four singers) and involves the imitation and personification of various animals. Besides rhythmic dances and music, it includes walking on live coals, and breaking of coconuts with their heads. The performers often sing in Swahili language in a deep voice (referred to as ghoghro awaj) and accompany
their songs with hokara, sounds like ho ho, but they seldom know the meanings of the words.

As early as the nineteenth century, we have references to the Sidi dances and rituals in the official records. The Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency provides a vivid account of Sidi religious rituals and their sacred dances. It states, ‘The life of the city at night has many strange features. In Madanpura, the Sidis may be found indulging in one of the noisy revels, which constitute their only relaxation, and which have the effect of working them into a state bordering upon frenzy. They have four chief dances, which are said to be of African origin and, when properly performed, to induce the spirit of divination.’ The Gazetteer also states that the head woman of the tribe or the Sidi ‘patelni’ as he calls her stands in the middle of the dance circle, encouraging and coaxing the dancers with approval and occasionally slapping a drummer to boost his flagging energy (Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Vol. 27, ed. James Macnabb Campbell, Government Central Press, Bombay, 1909:191). Mention is also made of the masseur who for a paltry sum promises to provide a massage that induces sleep and the presence of religious mendicants or fakirs begging for alms.

**Sidi music**

The music of the Sidis serves as the clearest example of cultural survival and retention among the descendants of Africans who settled in India. The musical traditions that they carried with them to their new homeland became the vehicle, which enabled them to preserve their collective identity and retain cultural memory. According to Basu, the Sidis performed the ngoma dances during celebrations such as birthdays and weddings in the royal courts (Basu 1993). The popular songs of the Sidis – *Balo, Leva and Bandugia* – reflect their pride in their ancestry and their religious feelings.

On the occasion of marriages and other communal celebrations, men and women form a circle and dance together to the sounds of dhol or drums and the rattle *jhungajhuna*. They use coconut shells as rattles, which are wrapped in green cloth and the musical instrument is called *Mashiro*. The Sidis in India as well as other countries play the *malungu*, a single-string musical bow also found in East Africa and as far away as Brazil where it is called *berimbau*. These musical instruments are venerated for their purity and sanctity and associated with their saints. It is forbidden to touch or handle these instruments in a state of ritual impurity, which points to similar beliefs on the African continent.
The sacred character of the Dhamal dance is evident from the fact that the dancers as well as the audience are forbidden to wear shoes in the area where the dance is performed. They are also not allowed to smoke cigarettes or bidis (local cigarettes).

For the Sidis, the chanting of devotional songs and the repetitive remembrance of the name of Allah is the simplest way of awakening their dormant divine energy. The latter referred to as zikari music was and is an integral part of the Sufic tradition. In singing the praises of God, the Sufis strive to attain unity with God.

Some of the Sidis became fakirs or wandering mendicants and earned their livelihood from alms received for their musical performance (see Chapter 8 for representation of Sidi fakir in Indian art). They often travelled with their families, and made a living by singing and dancing. In this role, they were able to gradually assimilate into Indian society and find a measure of acceptance. Sidi fakirs interact with other Muslim fakirs as well as holy men or ascetics from Hindu religious orders. Furthermore, all of them share certain beliefs in the healing and miraculous powers of certain individuals. Basu states that the Sidis in Saurashtra live in close proximity to the Bhils (the tribal populations of the forest) with whom they have close interactions, including in some instances, intermarriage between the two communities (Basu 1993:64). Their performances include a variety of musical instruments such as coconut rattles, conches, shakers and armpit-held drums, which are reminiscent of their African roots. However, their most distinctive instrument is the four-footed drum with its pegged head and four feet. Similar types of drums are widely found in the east coast of Africa and are similar to the zeze. Today, the Sidi Goma dancers also employ these drums.

Sidi music also entails certain sounds, which are called gongal from instruments made of wood. The Sidis in Karnataka perform using a musical instrument known as the gumat, a type of drum that is also used in Goa, and tanbourah, which is similar to the harp found in Mecca.

The Sidis, like the descendants of Africans in other parts of the world, gave the gift of song to the societies in which they lived. Their culture has survived mostly through their music. An example of this is a popular song, called ‘cabelos torcidos’ (meaning locks of hair), sung even today in Daman by the local population. This song describes vividly the physical traits of the Africans (Pinto 1992:94).

Thus, the Sidis continue their African traditions of music and dance, including the practice of drumming and the use of instruments such as conches, shakers etc. The music of the Sidis incorporates and retains many of the elements characteristic of traditional music on the African
continent. This includes a balance between repetition and variation and the distinctly noticeable ‘call and response’ technique. Additionally, the participation of the community is essential which can be observed in the soloist who is followed by the chorus. The Sidi music like that of Africa is fundamentally religious in nature and the line between the sacred and the secular is completely blurred. Through song and dance, the Sidis have kept alive and perpetuated their collective memory and their unique African identity.

In the visual arts also, the Sidis have preserved and retained some African traditions, notably in the making of patchwork quilts that are used in the homes as mattress covers to give their daughters at the time of weddings and on the occasion of the birth of children. These quilts are known as ‘Kawandi’ and have been researched by Henry Drewal, mainly in Karnataka. They incorporate the Christian cross as well as the motif of the crescent moon found in Islam. This indicates the assimilation of aspects of the two religious traditions by the Sidis of Karnataka, some of whom were Muslims, and others who had escaped from Goa and owed allegiance to Christianity.

The culture of the Sidis, thus, provides evidence of a diasporic community, which over time has adapted and assimilated aspects of their adopted land while retaining and preserving some essential aspects of their ancestral cultures. We can see the interplay of continuity and change in their culture.

Notes
1 According to her estimates a few years ago, there were approximately 50,000 Sidis in Pakistan. See Basu, Helene. ‘Africans in India’, Frontline, 22(18), 27 August–9 September 2005, pp. 59–60.
2 The term makhan in Hindi and Gujarati refers to butter.
3 Helene Basu who has undertaken extensive research on the Sidis believes that the shrine of Ghori Pir, regarded as among the most sacred of Sidi shrines and which for centuries is the centre of Sidi spirituality has in recent years been appropriated by and transformed into an Islamic site (Basu 1993:61).
4 In the Arabian Peninsula, the zar ceremonies, which involve the possession of women by spirits is called habashiyah from the term Habshi meaning Ethiopian (Alpers 1984:61).
5 In Gujarati language, the word ‘Dhamal’ denotes noisy, mischievous play.
6 In Indian languages, Lonkdi refers to a fox, while ‘Chibda’ is a vegetable related to the squash family.
7 Recently a film on the subject has been produced by Beheroze Shroff entitled, ‘We’re Indian and African: Voices of the Sidis’, DVD Video, Irvine, California, 2005.
The descendants of the Africans in India occupy a prominent place in the history of the medieval period as trusted slaves, mercenaries and military commanders in the armies of the sultans. A number of them rose to high positions commanding large armies and resources. They were patrons of art and architecture and many are credited with building beautiful mosques, tombs, fortresses and funerary monuments, which attest to their wealth and power. Until recently, they were overlooked in art, but scholars are now recognising their presence in and their patronage of the field of art and architecture.

One challenge facing scholars is how to identify Africans in the paintings. Not all dark-skinned individuals depicted in Indian paintings are Sidis. Art historians, however, have been quite effective in identifying the Sidis or Habshis by the inscriptions in the paintings, the peculiar dome-shaped hats unique to the Africans in India and the physical characteristics as well as the absence of beards and facial hair, which signified eunuch status. Some of the significant contributions made by the Sidis to art and architecture are discussed in the following pages.

Sidi contribution to architecture

One of the best-known architectural monuments of Ahmedabad, Gujarat is the Sidi Saiyyed Mosque built by a Habshi nobleman by the name of Shaykh Sayyid al-Habshi Sultani during the reign of Sultan Muzaffar III (1572–1573). According to Commissariat, he was originally a slave of Rumi Khan and later joined the service of Sultan Mahmud III (Commissariat 1938:502). Upon the death of his patron, he joined the service of Jhujhar Khan. It is believed that on his retirement he received several villages in gift and amassed great wealth. He is said
to have owned over a 100 slaves and a large number of camels and horses (Ibid. 502). During his lifetime, Sidi Sayyid also used his wealth to provide food daily to over a 1,000 people in his public kitchen. During the time of British rule, the mosque served as an office until its restoration by Lord Curzon in 1818.

The Sidi Saiyyed Mosque depicted in Figure 8.1 contains exquisitely carved windows or traceries (Figure 8.2), which represent the pinnacle of Islamic art and aesthetics from the sultanate period.

According to Fergusson, the carvings on the window screen remain unparalleled. He goes on to state, ‘At Agra and Delhi there are some nearly as fine, but neither so extensive nor so exquisitely balanced as

![Figure 8.1 Sidi Saiyyed Mosque](source: Photographs by the author.)

![Figure 8.2 Sidi Saiyyed Mosque with Intricately Carved Windows or Jalis](source: Photographs by the author.)
these . . . It is probably more like a work of nature than any other architectural detail that has been designed, even by the best architects of Greece or the Middle Ages’ (Fergusson 1866:86–87). Commissariat echoed similar sentiments when he referred to the mosque as ‘the last noble specimen of the great creative period of the Muslim architecture of Gujarat’ (Commissariat 1957:505). Information about its patron is found in *An Arabic history of Gujarat* written by Abdullah Muhammad ibn Umar, who wrote his account in 1605. According to him he was personally acquainted with Sidi Sayyid, the latter having died in 1576 (Shokoohy, in Robbins and Mcleod 2006:145–161).

There is an inscription in the mosque which provides some additional information about its builder which states that ‘the mosque was built by Sidi Saeed, an Abyssinian in the service of Rumi Khan, second son of Khudavand Khan Khwaja Safar Salmani, the governor of Surat during the tenth Gujarat Sultan Mahmud Shah’. The inscription further states that, Sidi Sayyid joined the personal retinue of Bilal Jhar Jhar Khan, the renowned Abyssinian general. He is said to have died in 1576.

Several other Sidis namely Ikhtiyar Khan, Qasim Khan and Siddi Shamshir Khan are credited with patronising the construction of buildings and aqueducts in the vicinity of Ahmedabad. Another outstanding building attributed to an African is the mosque of Sidi Bashir in Ahmedabad, which was named after a fifteenth-century Abyssinian. This mosque (now in ruins) was built during the sultanate period and is located near the main railway station in Ahmedabad. Sidi Bashir was said to have been a slave of Darya Khan, a childhood companion of Mahmud I (1459–1511), the sultan of Gujarat. The mosque no longer exists but its facade and the shaking minarets still survive and have been the subject of awe and admiration for their artistic beauty and technical ingenuity. It is considered to be an engineering marvel. It is said that if one shakes one of the minarets, the other one also shakes. The same architect who designed the Shaking Minarets in all probability built the Dargah of Sidi Sarang. According to some, Sidi Sarang was a nobleman in the service of Sultan Mahmud Begada and the mosque was completed in 1452. Another building in Ahmedabad that deserves mention is the Dargah of Sidi Sultan, located in the Shahibaug area near the police stadium.

Africans are also associated with the construction of mosques not only in Ahmedabad but also in the region referred to as Deccan, at Adoni, Aurangabad, Bijapur, Janjira and other cities. It is said that an African named Yaqut Dubuli was commissioned by Muhammad Shah (1627–1656) to decorate the *mihrab* in the Jami Masjid. His name
is inscribed in the mosque (Obeng 2003:106). The Jami mosque at Adoni is said to have been built by Sidi Masud Khan, the governor of Sikander Adil Shah ca. 1683.

Some of the finest examples of architecture attributed to the Sidis are found in the city of Aurangabad and are associated with Malik Ambar, who was the de facto ruler of Ahmadnagar and exercised power for nearly thirty years. The buildings attributed to him include the Jami Mosque constructed in 1615 at Khirki, located about eight miles southeast of Daulatabad, the Naukhanda palace also in Khirki and the Kali mosque. The Naukhanda palace is a huge, sprawling complex that included *zenanas (women’s quarters)*, a *mosque*, *hammam (bath)*, *divans* and gardens. He also built underground canals or *qanats* for the provision of adequate water supply. His tomb at Khuldabad, with its elegant arches and the jalis (or perforated screens with geometrical patterns) as well as its dome decorated with the lotus petals, stars and flowers are both majestic and elegant. As pointed out by Robbins and McLeod, the tomb of Malik Ambar and that of his wife Bibi Karima, more austere than his, at Khuldabad provide examples of funerary architecture and are evidence of the significant contribution of Sidis to art and architecture (Robbins and Mcleod 2006:89–90).

In addition to mosques and funerary architecture, Malik Ambar is also credited with the building of canals, irrigation networks, schools and secular architecture. Malik Ambar built fortifications at Antur in Aurangabad (which is in the present-day state of Maharashtra), with the necessary provision of water supply. The three inscriptions discovered at Antur are all attributed to Ambar in which he refers to himself using lofty titles such as ‘the benefactor of humanity’, and ‘the pillar of the kingdom’ (Ibid. 70–71). He repaired and strengthened the fort at Qandahar and built Ambarkot as a defense against the threat of Mughals. This structure contains nearly three miles of fortifications and incorporates varied architectural traditions (Ibid. 78). Other forts built by the Sidis include the fort at Anjanvel in Ratnagiri district in the Konkan region. According to some accounts, its builder was one Sidi Sa’at. The fort is said to have been attacked and captured by Siddi Khairiyat Khan who made additions to it in 1707 (Chauhan 1995:246). A notable mosque attributed to a Sidi is the Mosque of Pir Karimuddin at the fortress of Piro.

There are also numerous buildings in Bidar that are associated with the so-called Habshis or descendants of Africans. Most significant of these is the area known as ‘Habshi Kot’, translated as the fortress of the Habshi or Abyssinians. Situated in the outskirts of the town atop a hill, this area contains numerous tombs belonging to prominent
Habshi nobles, many of whom served in the court of the Bahmani and Baridi kings. Most notable among these was Malik Marjan who was appointed the governor of Bidar by Ibrahim Adil Shah II and served in this position from 1636 to 1656. Marjan exercised power for nearly three decades, ultimately dying of injuries in battle against the forces of Aurangzeb who invaded Bidar (Yazdani 1947:15). Marjan is said to have engaged in building activities in Bidar and carried out repairs of existing buildings as well as strengthening the defences of the town (Ibid. 83). The Habshi population of Bidar often revolted against their masters and, because of its strategic hilltop location, the Habshi Kot was utilised by them as a refuge. Over the years, numerous stories have circulated among the local population who claim to have seen a large Abyssinian baking cakes on the roof of a ruined building (Ibid.180–181).

The religious architecture of the Sidis was influenced by and reflects the aesthetic and building traditions of the Adil Shahi dynasty. Ibrahim Adil Shah II who assumed the throne in 1580 was a great lover and patron of all the arts. During his rule, Bijapur witnessed an explosion of artistic activity. He invited and patronised artists and poets from distant lands, as far away as Abyssinia, Turkey and Central Asia. An Abyssinian slave of Muhammad Adil Shah by the name of Yaqut Dabuli Habshi is also associated with several impressive buildings in Bijapur. These include a tomb, an elegant mosque and the mihrab of the Jami Masjid. The latter is dated 1635 and is beautifully painted and ornately decorated. Other notable buildings in Bijapur include one in the Ibrahim Rauza complex attributed to the Ethiopian eunuch Malik Sandal who served as the minister of Ibrahim II (1580–1626) and Sultan Mahmud (1626–1656). His name is associated with several other majestic buildings. The Ibrahim Rauza is a funerary complex, which incorporates a baoli (stepwell), fountain, a mosque and a tomb. The dome built of stone was intended to look like it was built of teak. There is an inscription in the Ibrahim Rauza, which records that the project cost 150,900 gold huns, an indication of the considerable wealth of its builder (Robbins 2006:92). Malik Sandal’s real contribution lies in his talent for incorporating different styles and forms of art in his buildings. In the rivalry between the Mughal Emperor Jahangir and the great African slave, Malik Ambar of Ahmadnagar, Sandal sided with the Mughals. In 1624, Ambar invaded the kingdom of Bijapur. He burned and devastated Ibrahim’s city, Nauraspur, thereby destroying some of the elegant buildings and artistic legacy of Ibrahim (see William Dalrymple, ‘The Renaissance of the Sultans’, New York Review of Books, June 25, 2015:36–38).
The mausoleum of Sirul Khan who was the chief of Janjira from 1707 until his death in 1733 is located in the vicinity of the Jami Mosque in a tiny village near the Janjira fort, in the village of Khokari. There are three imposing stone tombs here belonging to the Indo-Saracenic style. The nearby tombs are said to be those of Sidi Yaqut Khan and his brother Khariat Khan (Michell 1999:114; Bombay Gazetteer, Vol. 11). Thus, after the fall of Bijapur, the Sidis exercised power from the island of Janjira, which includes an impregnable stone fortress with massive walls, numerous small mosques, residential quarters and storage areas. The residence of the nawab of Janjira in Murud is also an impressive and imposing structure. Thus, the architecture of Janjira stands as a testament to the formidable power and impressive building skills of the Sidis.

Visual evidence of Sidis in the art of India

There is evidence of Africans in the royal paintings of India as early as the sixteenth century. The Mughal Empire was founded in 1526 in India by Babur, a descendant of Timur and the Mongol Genghis Khan. The descendants of Africans in India came under Mughal rule, especially during the reign of Akbar. By the time Aurangzeb ascended the throne and conquered the Deccan, a large portion of the Indian subcontinent had come under Mughal rule. African nobles were a presence in the Mughal court and the Mughal miniatures reflect their presence.

From the mid-sixteenth century onwards, we have visual evidence of Africans in the art of the Deccan, the Mughal courts as well as the paintings of the princely states like Kutch, especially during the reign of Rao Lakhpatji (1741–1760). The Sidis appear in the royal paintings of Kutch starting from the middle of the eighteenth century, especially in the reign of Rao Lakhpatji. He ushered in a golden age of painting. Sidis or descendants of Africans are portrayed quite frequently in the entourage of the ruler or with the nobility as musicians, personal bodyguards, *bukkab* bearers and bearers of flywhisks. They are conspicuous by their dark skin colour and their domed hats. Goswamy observes that while many of these Africans appear to hold musical instruments or flywhisks, they may have weapons concealed in their clothing and were therefore, personal bodyguards of the rulers, employed to protect them and trusted for their loyalty and courage (Goswamy and Dallapiccola 1983:235).

Sidis appear not merely as subjects in the art but were also patrons and collectors of art. According to Zebrowski, Sidi Masud Khan, the
governor of Sikander Adil Shah, in addition to being a collector of art may have founded a school of painting at Adoni, from where a set of Bijapuri paintings have been recovered (Zebrowski 1983:239). Masud, the governor of Kurnool exercised control over Adoni from 1678 to 1688. He established the towns of Imatiazgadh and Adilabad and is also said to have built the Jami Mosque in ca. 1683. He was both a collector of art and a patron of the Kurnool school of painting.

Portrayal of Africans in the Deccan paintings

Sidis or the descendants of Africans played an important role in the history of the Deccan, a number of them serving as prime ministers or de facto rulers of the kingdoms of Ahmadnagar, Bijapur and Golconda. The two most prominent Africans depicted in the paintings of the Deccan School are Malik Ambar, the de facto ruler of Ahmadnagar and Ikhlas Khan, prime minister of Bijapur. Malik Ambar rose from slave status to become the most powerful military force in the Nizam Shahi state. He carried out military offensive against both Bijapur and Golconda and gained such renown that even the mighty Mughals like Emperor Jahangir acknowledged his prowess.

Figure 8.3 depicts Emperor Jahangir who is shown as the ruler of the entire world, encompassing all lands and the oceans symbolised by the cattle and the fish beneath the globe. Jahangir is shown with a bow and an arrow shooting through the head of Malik Ambar, his acknowledged enemy whose head is impaled on a pole. This, however, is a fantasised wish since the two had never even met. Ambar, the ruler of Ahmadnagar was much feared and seen as a threat to Mughal power.

There are a number of paintings in which Sidis figure prominently. Between 1600 and 1640, there are nine paintings from Ahmadnagar, eight of which depict Africans (Zebrowski 1983:37). Zebrowski contends that Malik Ambar was, undoubtedly, the patron of these paintings including a painting, now in the Edwin Binney III Collection that depicts an African wearing a diaphanous white ‘jama’ (probably, Ahmadnagar, ca. 1610).

As early as the sixteenth century, Sidis or descendants of Africans appear in Mughal paintings. During the reign of Akbar, a significant number of Africans came under Mughal rule. There are numerous paintings depicting them. These include Habshis among a crowd of courtiers paying their respects to the emperor on the occasion of the birth of his son Murad. Other paintings worthy of mention are: an Abyssinian participating in a weapons inventory (ca.1650–1658 from
the Chester Beatty Library, London); African eunuchs Firoz Khan and Khidmat Khan attending Jahangir; and an African at the Chishti shrine in Ajmer (Robbins 2006:163–164.)

In the palace of Sihor, the old capital of the former state of Bhavnagar in Gujarat, there is a painting that portrays Sidi Jhaver who is said to have given his life in the service of the State and died a hero fighting in a battle in the village of Tana.

A painting, now in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris depicts Burhan Nizam Shah II (1591–1595, Ahmadnagar), probably in his early thirties, seated on his throne offering gold to a courtier. A sword-bearer fans the king with a white cloth, and a young page offers him paan. Both are believed to be Abyssinians. The men are dressed in the unique clothing style of Deccan.
The miniature painting (Figure 8.4) comprised part of a collection made by Major Polier, a Swiss soldier who lived in India from 1757 to 1788. In the centre there is an inscription in Persian ‘Lord of the Deccan’ (Badshah-i-Dekhan). It is possible that the prince in the painting is Murtaza II who was placed on the throne by Malik Ambar in 1602. The prince is lying beneath a large tree. The two kneeling pages probably are Abyssinians. One is massaging the prince’s leg, while the other offers wine. Both are adorned with gold belts and jewelled armbands similar to the Burhan II portrait mentioned above (Zebrowski 1983:115).

Malik Ambar is undoubtedly the best-known African in India. His power and fame is evident in the large number of his portraits from the Deccan School of Art. Figure 8.5 is also said to be a portrait of Malik Ambar. This portrait from the Victoria and Albert Museum is inscribed in Persian, which states, ‘Portrait of Ambar, the work of

*Figure 8.4* ‘The Siesta’, Bijapur (ca. 1605)
(Source: bpk Bildagentur/Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu, Berlin, Germany/Photo: Georg Niedermeiser. Used with permission.)
Hashim’. Another portrait of Malik Ambar in the National Museum of India, New Delhi has an inscription that identifies the figure as Malik Ambar.

Figure 8.6 is said to be a portrait of Fath Khan (Ahmadnagar, ca. 1620), a son of Malik Ambar. The figure depicted in the painting is taller and has a hooked nose. Zebrowski notes that his turban is also different (Zebrowski 1983:37). There is some controversy whether the subject in the painting is, in fact, Malik Ambar.

Africans are also depicted in other royal paintings. There is a portrait of Muhammad Qutb Shah (1611–1626) of Golconda which shows the king seated on the throne in a pavilion. Three diplomats are shown presenting their credentials to the king. This painting also includes four richly decorated Arabian horses led by pages. One of the pages to
the right of the king is an Abyssinian. Another interesting painting by Payag (ca. 1640) depicts Mughal Emperor Jahangir presenting Prince Khurram with a turban ornament. It is a part of court scene in which there appears to be an African among the courtiers.

Another Sidi who figures prominently in the paintings of seventeenth-century Deccan art is Ikhlas Khan who like Malik Ambar attained great power and an influential position as prime minister in the court of Bijapur. Ikhlas Khan was an Abyssinian noble who bore the name of Malik Raihan Habshi. He served the sultans of Bijapur and was rewarded for his loyalty and abilities with the title of Ikhlas Khan. During the reign of Ibrahim Adil Shah II, Ikhlas Khan was given the title of ‘Wakil-ul-Sultanate’ (commander of the army) and

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*Figure 8.6 Portrait of Fath Khan, A Son of Malik Ambar (ca. 1620)*

(Source: © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ross-Coomaraswamy Collection. 17.3103. Used with permission.)
also served as finance minister. He attained great influence and power and was appointed to the position of chief minister under Muhammad Adil Shah (1627–1656). The importance of Ikhlas Khan is evident from the many royal miniature paintings in which he appears alone or with his royal patrons.

Figure 8.7 is a portrait of Ikhlas Khan, the prime minister of Bijapur, ca. 1640, in the Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library, London. It is said to be the work of the famous artist Chand Muhammad (Zebrowski 1983:34). Ikhlas Khan holds a sword in one hand and the other hand rests on a black shield.

An image from the Nasli and Alice Heeramanec Collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art shows Ikhlas Khan and Sultan Muhammad Adil Shah II of Bijapur (1580–1627). In that painting, Ikhlas Khan’s elegant clothes and proud bearing suggest a man of importance.

Figure 8.7 Ikhlas Khan, the Prime Minister of Bijapur
(Source: © The British Library Board, London. J.23.2. Used with permission.)
Figure 8.8 shows Prime Minister Ikhlas Khan leaning on a staff (India Office Library, London). This painting attributed to Muhammad Khan of Bijapur, ca. 1650, is one of the many representations of Ikhlas Khan in the art of the Deccan. He is shown with all the paraphernalia of a ruler, reflecting his immense power (Zebrowski 1983:130).

Figure 8.9 by artist Haidar Ali, in the Collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, shows Sultan Muhammad Adil Shah and his Prime Minister Ikhlas Khan riding an elephant (Bijapur, mid-seventeenth century). Ikhlas Khan wears steel grey robes, while the sultan is wearing a gold garment (Zebrowski 1983:132). In another painting from Bijapur, also from the mid-seventeenth century, Prime Minister Ikhlas Khan is shown with an attendant.

There are several other paintings that depict Ikhlas Khan. One of these from Golconda, now in the British Library Collection and dated
approximately from 1670 to 1680 shows Ikhlas Khan on horseback. That image is very reminiscent of Deccani paintings. In that painting, Ikhlas Khan is depicted in a long white jama, which is embellished with flowers. A sword and a shield hang from his left side and on the right, one can see a bow with quiver and arrows. The horse on which he rides is also ornately decorated. The profusion of gold and elegant garments conveys his high position and association with royalty.

The large number of portraits of Ikhlas Khan in the art of the Deccan is a testament to his enormous power and influence. In all of the paintings, he is elegantly attired but always depicted as sombre and formal as befitting his position.

In addition to serving in the military as soldiers, mercenaries and commanders, Sidis often made their living as Sufi saints or musicians. Figure 8.10 depicts a lyre player who appears to be of African descent. The lyre in the painting is known as the Nubian lyre, which the Sidis
refer to as nangas. The African subject in this painting was identified by Hermann Goetz as Sidi Sa’id, a follower of Malik Ambar. This Mughal or Deccan painting is dated approximately between 1640 and 1660 (Robbins and McLeod 2006:20).

A large number of court and portrait paintings from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries depict the dark-hued descendants of Africans. These include a scene from the durbar of Sultan Muhammad Adil Shah in the collection in the City Palace Museum of Jaipur. This painting is the work of Muhammad Khan, son of Miyan Chand, dated 1651. In the durbar scene, Muhammad Adil Shah is shown with his noblemen. Behind him the standing figure on his left is possibly an African (Zebrowski 1983:127).
A beautiful painting of an African eunuch from Golconda (ca. late seventeenth century) was probably produced during the reign of Sultan Abdullah Qutb Shah (1626–1672). While the eunuch may not have occupied a senior rank, he undoubtedly has a demeanour suggesting that he was a man aware of his power, perhaps related to his closeness to the harem and its secrets. According to Zebrowski (Ibid. 164), the dark complexion of the eunuch suggests that he was a member of Golconda’s African community. The absence of a beard or a moustache is an indication of his status as a eunuch. He is dressed in a diaphanous white robe against a turquoise background. His proud stance and arrogant appearance is suggestive of his high position at court. As pointed out, eunuchs knew the secrets of the harem that placed them in a privileged position (Mitchell and Zebrowski 1999:200).

Another noteworthy painting is that of Sidi Masud Khan of Golconda from 1680 to 1685. This is a clearly identifiable portrait of Sidi Masud who figures prominently in the chronicles of his time and rose to great power and ambition. This painting depicts Sidi Masud Khan, an African by descent who served as a minister at the court of Bijapur. Masud Khan exercised power until 1683. After Bijapur fell to the Mughals, he moved to Adoni where he ruled for a while. He is credited with building a beautiful mosque there.

In this painting (Figure 8.11), now in the Ashmolean Museum of the University of Oxford, he holds a bouquet of flowers in his left hand while he has a handkerchief in his right hand. He is wearing a knee-length jama over a pleated skirt. The turban and sword are signs of status (Goswami 1983:86). Masud appears resolute and confident.

There is a portrait of Sidi Ibrahim (from Bijapur, Deccan, late seventeenth century) in the Goenka Collection of paintings (Crill 1999:99). A tall dark-skinned man, the subject of the portrait is identified in the inscription as Sidi Ibrahim, the kotwal or police head of the city of Bijapur.

Another painting (from ‘Shahjahanama’ manuscript, Freer Gallery, Smithsonian Institution) depicts the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan honouring Muslim theologians. Included in the painting are two Africans.

In addition to the Deccan, Africans are also portrayed in the paintings of Jodhpur and Kishangarh. The artists of Rajasthan appear to have been influenced by the Deccan style. These include a portrait of Maharaja Jaswant Singh riding a horse in the Kanoria Collection, Patna, ca. 1680. In this painting the Maharaja on horseback is attended by what appears to be an elderly dark-skinned attendant, in
all probability of African descent. The garments of the attendant show similarities with those found in the art of the Deccan which suggests that the African retainer was recruited during Jaswant Singh’s service in the Deccan (Crill 1999:50), when he was sent there to assist Prince Mu’azzam as governor. This painting is reminiscent of African attendants depicted in the eighteenth-century paintings of the Kutch ruling families.

Africans in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paintings

From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, we also have visual evidence of Africans in the paintings of the princely states like Kutch, in Western India especially during the reign of Rao Lakhpatji. A large number of Sidis were recruited by the rulers of Kutch to serve as bodyguards in an environment that was fraught with political rivalries, murders and
instability. The Sidis at court seized the opportunity and took advantage of the political intrigues and rivalries to enhance their power (Goswami and Dallapiccola 1983:23). They exerted considerable influence in the reign of Rao Godji who feared greatly for his life and later under Rao Raydhanji. Sidis or the descendants of Africans are portrayed in these paintings quite frequently in the entourage of the ruler or with the nobility as musicians, personal bodyguards, hukkah bearers or as bearers of flywhisks. They are conspicuous by their dark skin colour and their domed hats. Goswami observes that while many of these Africans appear to hold musical instruments or flywhisks, they may actually have weapons concealed in their clothing. They were personal bodyguards of the rulers employed to protect them and were trusted for their loyalty and courage (Goswami in, ‘Occupying some spaces, darkly: Sidis in the Paintings from Kutch’ in Robbins 2006: 235).

A painting from the eighteenth century depicts a royal procession of Rao Lakhpatji who is seated on an ornately decorated elephant. Among the retainers it is easy to identify several who are of African descent. Goswami points out that some of the Sidis hold spears in their hands that have streamers tied to them (Goswami 1983:74). Another painting shows Lakhpatji in a durbar scene with Rao Desalji who is seated on the opulent throne with his grandson on his lap. There are numerous courtiers in the painting, among whom are several Sidis wearing the typical red hats.

There is a painting of Rao Lakhpatji, the ruler of Kutch in which he is accompanied by armed soldiers, bodyguards and retainers on foot. It shows the huqqa bearer and his Sidi assistant holding the brazier. The assistant has characteristic Negroid features (Ibid. 74).

Figure 8.12 depicts Maharaja Bakhat Singh of Nagaur with Rao Lakhpatji of Kutch. According to Crill, artists who were influenced by the Jodhpur style of painting probably executed this painting in ca. 1740–1750 during Bakhat Singh’s visit to the court of Rao Lakhpatji of Kutch (Crill 1999:97). In this painting, one can see three Sidi retainers with their dark skins and characteristic hats.

An interesting painting dated ca. 1740–1745, from Jodhpur or Nagaur, depicts Maharaja Bakhat Singh attending a dance performance. The maharaja seated on an elaborate throne is surrounded by lush foliage, birds, flowers and monkeys. On the bottom right of the painting is unmistakably a Sidi or Habshi of African descent as evidenced by his distinct Negroid features.

An exquisite depiction of Sidis is found in a painting, which shows Rao Lakhpatji in durbar. In it the rao is seated on a throne with his courtiers surrounding him. Outside on the right are three dark-skinned
Sidis looking into the durbar hall. They are dressed in identical red garments with matching red hats and gold looped earrings and necklaces. They appear to have daggers or similar weapons tucked into their waistbands. The painter has embellished the painting with lush green foliage, palm trees and ornamental flowering shrubs, which enhance the charm of the court painting.

There is an equestrian portrait of Rao Godji II (ca. late eighteenth century) from Kutch, which shows the ruler mounted on a decorated horse. His retinue of retainers and guards accompanies him. Clearly identifiable in the bottom right of the painting are the Sidi retainers – two of whom are wearing the characteristic red-domed hats.

Another painting from the late eighteenth century depicts the Sidi Dhamal dance. It is attributed to the artist Lal Mohammad Juma, and is currently in the possession of the Bharatiya Sanskriti Darshan Museum in Bhuj.

In addition to the numerous royal paintings from Kutch from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries discussed above, there are others that deserve mention. Notable among them is Figure 8.13 titled, ‘Allah-wirdi Khan Receiving a Petition’. The inscription in this painting identifies the nobleman as Mansabdar Allah-wirdi Khan who must
have been an influential nobleman. The three attendants standing behind Allah-wirdi Khan have distinctly African features and were therefore certainly of African descent.

A painting in the Victoria and Albert Museum Collection in London dated ca. 1795 depicts a prince riding a bejewelled elephant accompanied by his army. The prince in the painting is said to be Nawab Ihtisam al Mulk Bahadur of Hyderabad and the artist was probably Venkatchellam. The prince’s retinue includes a number of foot soldiers carrying weapons whose appearance points to their African descent (Zebrowski 1983:267).

A later painting, ca. 1815–1823, in the National Museum of India is entitled ‘Nawab Ghulam Ahmad Khan of Kurnool visiting the saint Burhan ud din Sahib’. The attendant who is accompanying Ghulam Ahmad appears to be of African descent (Ibid. 273).

As stated earlier, scholars and researchers are faced with the problem of identifying Africans and people of African descent in the art
and history of India. Not all dark-skinned people were Africans and thus, there is a need to verify the African ancestry of these individuals. It is also the case that while many of the Sidis were of African ancestry, the term *Sidi* or *Sayyid* was also applied to non-Africans. Sometimes special techniques were used to portray Africans in art especially from the Mughal period. The most common of them was the distinctive red-domed hat.

Robbins and McLeod point out that many African slaves and their descendants were given names of precious stones, perfumes or flowers, for example Qaranful (capes), Ambar (amber gris), Kafur (Camphor), Rihan (basil), Firuz (turquoise), Jawhar (diamonds) (Robbins 2006:258). Thus, these names in paintings could also help identify people of African descent.

From the above account, it is clear that descendants of Africans contributed in significant ways to the art and architecture of India. They built and embellished beautiful mosques, tombs, fortresses and other buildings and sometimes appear as subjects in court paintings to surprise and tantalise us. Africans, many of whom rose from slave status to positions of power have left behind an impressive artistic and architectural legacy. It is to be hoped that a new generation of art historians will further explore and bring to light their presence in Indian art and architecture.

Notes
1 For more details see Lalet Kumar, ‘The Mystery of the Shaking Minarets . . .’ in Robbins 2006:139.
2 The Bahmani and Baridi dynasties came from Iran and Turkey respectively and ruled over Deccan from 1347 to 1538 and 1538 to 1609.
The British formally abolished the slave trade in 1843. Subsequently their naval ships began to patrol the Indian Ocean to capture and confiscate dhows transporting African slaves to India and beyond. However, the abolition of the slave trade did not mean that slavery and slave holding ended in India. This was especially the case in the princely states or protected states in Western India that enjoyed autonomous status. Cases in which African slaves joined the household of the native rulers as wives or personal attendants were also overlooked. Chatterjee cites the example of the princely state of Hyderabad where, according to an official ‘every Arab who comes to Hyderabad to seek his fortune, or who returns from a visit to Arabia, brings with him one or two Habshi [Abyssinian] slaves’ (Chatterjee 2006: 156). Furthermore, the British Indian courts in the late nineteenth century often rendered judgements resulting in the return of slaves to their indigenous masters and mistresses.

Arab dhows continued to illegally transport human cargo to be sold in the slave markets of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea ports. Occasionally, the British Anti-Slavery Patrols intercepted these ships and emancipated the slaves who were rescued in these operations. The freed Africans were sent to Aden, Bombay or the Seychelles Island. Consequently, a few of these ships carrying the rescued slaves arrived in Bombay. This, however, posed problems for the authorities because of the difficulty in finding a suitable way to dispose of this human cargo. In 1860, the Church Missionary Society had established a home known as the ‘African Asylum’ for these slaves in Sharanpur near Nasik, now in the state of Maharashtra. This house, which was funded by the British Indian Government, received about 200 African children. According to the Annual report of the Mission in 1872, the Home sheltered sixty-nine inmates comprising forty-five boys and
twenty-four girls, but this represents only a small fraction of those rescued and brought to Bombay (Colomb 1873:102).

Accounts and reports from that time comment on the pitiful plight of these freed slaves who had few opportunities for education or employment. They were destined to lead wretched lives of poverty and illiteracy. Writing of their plight, Bishop Tozer, who had served as the leader of Universities’ Mission to Central Africa in the nineteenth century states, ‘I do not know whom I shall bewail most, those who after their arrival here are made over to Mohammedans, and adopt their religion, or those who, after having been instructed in the way of life in our institutions at Sharanpur, are thrown amongst the very dregs of European society on the railways, participate in their sins, and are a shame and dishonor to Christianity’ (Tozer cited in East African Slave Trade, 1871:21). During a period of five years, only thirty-four ‘Negro’ births were reported while the number of deaths was estimated to be 754 (Harrison 1871:21). Even though the accuracy of these statistics can be questioned, there can be little doubt that the death rate far exceeded the number of births, a testimony to the miserable and unsettled conditions of these freed slaves.

Some of the freed slaves were employed as sailors or crew members in the Indian Navy or as guards. In addition to the African Asylum at Nasik, the children were sent to the Roman Catholic Orphanage at Bandra, Bombay, the Mission High School in Ahmadnagar and the American Mission in Shirur (Pune).

The African Asylum was closed down in 1875 and an estimated 150 Africans returned to Freretown, near Mombasa, where the Rev. William Price founded a centre under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society of London. They were recruited for the purpose of proselytisation and the spread of Christianity.

As has been pointed out, the British Indian Government proved ineffective and in some cases unwilling to put an end to the domestic holding of slaves. This failure can be explained by their inability to fund and establish institutions such as shelters, missions, homes and hostels for the fugitives and newly emancipated slaves. As a result, slaves freed from the captured ships were placed in protective custody of Christian missions like Nasik Asylum or benevolent individuals (Chatterjee 2006:155). The financial cost of resettling and rehabilitating these slaves was formidable. The government acknowledged the problem when Bartle Frere in his testimony before the Select Committee of 1871 stated that Christian missions accepted only a few of the African children, the rest were kidnapped, became prostitutes or destitutes (Colomb 1873:100).
Ordinary rescued slaves mostly fell into the hands of the Arabs of Bombay, whose primary concern was to convert them to the religion of Islam and subsequently use them for their own purposes (Colomb 1873:103). Their lot was a pathetic one as described by Colomb who was charged with the suppression of the East African slave trade. He states ‘I am informed that in some cases they are quietly shipped from Bombay, and sold again into slavery – a fate not less happy, perhaps than that of many others, who are to be found in the slums of Bombay and Poona, “strangers in a strange land” in a wretched and helpless condition, with no one to care for them’ (Ibid. 103).

Thus, while the slave trade ended formally in the mid-nineteenth century, the condition of the majority of the freed slaves was pathetic and they were forced to live lives of poverty and misery (The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island Vol. 1, 1909:190–194). Describing the city and its inhabitants, the Gazetteer makes a special mention of the Sidis.3 ‘In the neighborhood of the Umarkhadi Jail and close to Ripon road dwell many Sidis or African Musalmans; the industrial population is specially numerous in Parel, Byculla and Nagpada; and the several Kolivadis of the island from Colaba to Sion shelter the descendants of the aboriginal colonists of Bombay’ (Ibid.)

The Gazetteer goes on to state that ‘the life of the city at night has many strange features. In Madanpura the Sidis may be found indulging in one of the noisy revels, which constitute their only relaxation, and which have the effect of working them into a state bordering upon frenzy. They have four chief dances, which are said to be of African origin, and when properly performed, to induce the spirit of divination. They are danced to the accompaniment of a shrill pipe and quaint drums, shaped like a cannon with a parchment mouth, astride each of which members of the company sit, while the rest of the Sidi jamat, first men, then women, and then both sexes together, dance round them for three or four hours. At intervals a bundle of straw is lighted, and the heads of the drums are pushed into the flames to tighten up the parchment. In the middle of the dancing circle stands the Sidi Patelni or headwoman of the tribe, now beating time to the rhythm of the music, now encouraging the dancers with loud words of approval or slapping a drummer to arouse his failing energy’ (Ibid. 191).

This account also alludes to the use of opium by the Sidis when it states, ‘The opium clubs of the city draw their patrons from widely-differing classes.’ Among these is mention of the Sidis of Zanzibar (Ibid.). The Sidis along with the poor of the city, such as hawkers, pan sellers and teashop keepers, are said to sleep on the pavements during the hot season. The Gazetteer states, ‘the pavements of the city are
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY AND THE PLIGHT OF FREED SLAVES

crowded with sheeted forms, each lying as nearly as possible with the head towards the north for fear of the anger of the Pole-star’. For in the words of an old adage;

‘Kibla muaf karta hai par Kutb hargis nahin!’ (The Qibla forgives, but the Pole star never!)

(Ibid. 192)

The exception to this were a small number of freed Africans fortunate enough to get opportunities and experiences which would in many cases transform their lives enabling them to contribute in significant ways. They were known as the ‘Bombay Africans’.

The Bombay Africans: return journey

The term ‘Bombay Africans’ is used to connote those Africans who were rescued by the British Naval squadrons and placed in Christian missions in Bombay, under the aegis of the Church Missionary Society. Many of these emancipated Africans acquired technical skills and knowledge of Hindi and English. Several of them spoke a number of Indian languages. The missionaries were hopeful that these emancipated Africans would actively help in the evangelisation of other Africans and thus further the cause of the missions.

After the abolition of the East African slave trade in 1843, a number of them were repatriated to Africa, especially Mombasa, between 1850 and 1910. By 1875, Freretown settlement had over 450 residents (Strayer 1978). In 1873–1874, at the suggestion of Sir Bartle Frere, the President of the Royal Geographic Society, some of these Bombay Africans were recruited to provide assistance to the expeditions that were launched to explore the African continent and promote the spread of Christianity. It is estimated that about 150 Bombay Africans were sent from Bombay to settle in Freretown (Temu 1971:54). These individuals made significant contributions to the expeditions of Livingstone, Burton, Speke, Stanley, Harry Johnston and other explorers in their roles as interpreters, guides, cooks, gun bearers, coolies and guards. In 1865, nine of them accompanied David Livingstone to East and Central Africa where they provided valuable assistance to the explorer and missionary. African women also participated in these expeditions.⁴ According to estimates, by 1880 there were more than 3,000 Bombay Africans in East Africa, with the largest numbers in Freretown and Rabai⁵ (Ibid. 58).
Price, the Superintendent of the Sharanpur Christian Village in Bombay, a settlement for emancipated slaves near Nasik, took some of the emancipated slaves with him to Africa. There are accounts of individual Bombay Africans who were transported to Africa. Prominent among these were William Jones, Abdulla Susi, James Chuma, Wikitani, Mathew Wellington, Jacob Wainwright, George David and Ishmael Semler.

Perhaps, the best known of the Bombay Africans was one Sidi Mubarak Bombay (ca. 1820–1885) who was born in the Yao Kingdom in East Africa, captured by Arab slavers and shipped to Gujarat, India on a dhow. Sidi Mubarak accompanied Speke in the expedition to discover the source of the Nile. He had met John Hanning Speke, the explorer in Africa when the latter invited him to join his expedition. He also participated in other expeditions, notably that of Henry Morton Stanley and Richard Francis Burton. Burton spoke highly of Sidi Mubarak when he wrote, ‘The gem of the party, however, is one Sidi Mubarak, who has taken to himself the agnomen of Bombay’ (Burton 1872:179). Information about Sidi Mubarak can be found in the expedition diaries and the photographs from that time (Strayer 1978:14–29).

In 1887 James Jones established the first printing press in Kenya. The Bombay Africans from Rabai were editors of the first English and Kiswahili publications such as the Coast Express and Mwalimu.

In 1875, the missionaries started a free dispensary in Mombasa. James Assura, a very competent Bombay African, assisted the English doctor at the dispensary. He had arrived from India at a young age and soon thereafter became an indispensable apprentice in the sixteen-bed hospital in Freretown. Describing Assura, who later came to be known by the name of James Ainsworth, a contemporary account said ‘he has proved a faithful friend, a conscientious Christian and an intelligent learner’ and praised him for carrying out the work of the mission (Ibid.).

These freed slaves referred to as Bombay Africans challenge the prevailing view and image of the Africans as passive victims of the slave trade and instead stress the important role they played in the exploration of the African continent and the contributions they made in the mapping of the continent. Without their knowledge of the lay of the land, their linguistic skills and their understanding of the indigenous peoples, the expeditions could not have succeeded in their endeavours. They also played an indispensable role in the establishment of new mission stations among the Nyika, Girama, Wakamba and Taita, all ethnic groups on the East African coast. The Bombay Africans also
served the missionaries and explorers with their loyalty. Individuals like Abdulla Susi (who hailed from Mapela Velha in Mozambique) and Jacob Wainwright remained with Livingston till his death. Thereafter, they demonstrated their devotion and absolute loyalty to Livingston by carrying his body all the way to the coast. Wainwright even attended his funeral in England where he was presented to Queen Victoria in 1874 and later received the National Geographic Society’s medal (Awaaz Magazine, ‘Bombay: Refuge for Slave Africans’ 2009:2).

The contributions and efforts of the Bombay Africans in the expeditions from 1885 to 1890 as well as their efforts in the Anti-Slavery campaign in East Africa represent the forgotten and much overlooked history of these individuals. Reverend William Jones helped to emancipate hundreds of African slaves while individuals like Abu Sidi founded a settlement for more than 3,000 former slaves near Mombasa (Ibid. 2009). Thus, these Bombay Africans played an invaluable role in the anti-slavery efforts, the spread of Christianity on the East African Coast as well as the exploration of the continent and in furthering geographical knowledge.

Sadly, after 1880, there developed a growing conflict and friction between them and the white missionaries who ultimately succeeded in denying the Africans any positions of leadership in the Missions. William S. Price was appointed as Special Commissioner to inquire into the charges brought against the missionaries and to bring about a resolution of the growing conflict. He came from England in 1881 and after his investigations wrote, ‘With regard to the Bombay Africans in general, the facts speak for themselves. It may well be asked where should we be now but for the valuable help which these men and women have given and are giving’ (quoted in Temu 1971). He went on to strongly defend the many contributions of the Bombay Africans when he stated, ‘They are spiritually minded, possess many gifts and qualifications, speak English and Swahili, and for more than fifteen years have worked faithfully, have the confidence and respect of Native Christians and Native Congregations should be under native pastors’ (Ibid. 73). By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bombay Africans had dispersed and their mission work among the freed slaves had ended. Their history and contributions, mostly forgotten, need to be unearthed and documented by a new generation of scholars. The Royal Geographic Society with the help of oral historians, museum specialists and historians has documented the lives of these Bombay Africans through photographs, maps and documents.

During the rule of the British, a handful of African descendants in India voluntarily returned to their countries of origin. Very little is
known about them. According to Mampilly, an Indo-African woman named Langi Nur-bai returned to Zanzibar and gained considerable renown for her music which she performed at weddings and other occasions (Mampilly 2001:3).

Most Sidis consider India as their home and have expressed little inclination to return to Africa despite their emotional ties to the continent. This suggests that notwithstanding all the challenges Sidis face in India, they have tried to assimilate into Indian culture and envision that their future is linked to the country.

Notes

1 Frere was responsible for negotiating the Treaty of Abolition with Zanzibar and consequently the newly established settlement for freed slaves was named Freretown after him.

2 Sir Bartle Frere was the President of the Royal Geographic Society.

3 According to the Gazetteer of 1909, in the year 1872, those who claimed to be of African descent in Bombay numbered 1,275. This figure declined to 619 in 1881, then 736 and 694 in 1891 and 1901 respectively. See Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island. Edited by S.M. Edwards, Vol. 1, October 1909, p. 205.

4 For more information on this see www.unlockingthearchives.rgs.org/resource/

5 Rabai is a historic location in Kilifi County, Kenya, about twelve miles outside the city of Mombasa. It was the first place where the Church Missionary Society established a Christian mission.
Very little reliable information is available on the women of African descent in India or elsewhere. It is an unfortunate fact that research on the institution of slavery and the slave trade in general has overlooked and in many cases completely neglected the experiences and status of the female slaves. These women, with just a few exceptions, find no mention in the pages of history, despite the fact that they played a prominent role in the acculturation process as well as the retention of the cultures of their original homeland. In India, the written documents rarely mention these women, while visual documentation in the paintings from the Deccan and other schools also provide no valuable insights. What we do know is that among the slaves transported to India from the east coast of Africa, there must have been Africans who were brought to India as wives and concubines, to serve as domestic workers and to provide sexual services. The written records also tell us that the price paid for a female slave was often greater than that for the males, an indication of the importance placed on the females for their reproductive value. Women, who were enslaved, served either as domestic servants referred to as ‘mjakazi’ (maid) in Swahili sources or as concubines, ‘surias’ in Kiswahili (Bromber 2007:111–127). However, once the Suria or concubine gave birth to a child, her social status improved significantly.

African female slaves were admired and desired wherever slavery existed. This was especially the case in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Hadrami poets1 described a beautiful woman and stated, ‘her tresses are Abyssinian black’ (quoted in Alpers, 1962:59). This was true also in India. Advertisements in newspapers in the nineteenth century provide evidence of the demand for African female slaves for sexual purposes (as mentioned in Chapter 3). Among the seafaring community in Western India known as Kharwas, it was common practice to give a young Sidi girl as a slave/servant in dowry to their daughter who

10
SIDI WOMEN
Past and present
would accompany her after marriage to her new home and serve as a maid and servant.

The majority of these women of African descent had converted to the religion of Islam and therefore, the status of Sidi women in India was similar to that of Muslim women in other societies. Sidi women’s primary role was in the domestic sphere as wives, mothers, concubines and domestic servants. They played and continue to play a crucial role in the performance of rites and domestic rituals and as bearers of the religious traditions. They are especially involved in the rituals relating to the various rites of passage. In addition, Sidi women also contributed economically by tending to the cattle and animals in rural areas, participating in agricultural tasks and collecting firewood and cow dung.

In keeping with the traditions of Islam, Sidi women were married at an early age but the consent of both the boy and girl is the norm in the present day. Divorce is permitted though social disputes are generally resolved by the Jamaat, meaning the Sidi community council. Polygamy is permitted and the custom of levirate (the marriage of the widow with the younger brother of the deceased husband) prevailed, though not compulsory. Cross-cousin marriages are also a common occurrence in the Sidi community. When a Sidi woman entered into marriage, she affiliated with the shakha or gotra (lineage) of her husband. This may suggest borrowing from the Indian customs and traditions. The Sidi women customarily married only among the Sidis, but in places like Jafarabad, Gujarat, it was common practice for them to marry into elite Muslim communities. In keeping with Islamic tradition, many Sidi women observe the custom of purdah or veiling though this custom is not that prevalent among the younger generation. Female literacy rates among the Sidi was 39 per cent in 2001, compared to the male literacy rate that was 61 per cent. This compares unfavourably with the overall literacy rate in Gujarat, which according to the 2011 census was 79 per cent; the male literacy rate was 87 per cent, the female was 71 per cent (Government of India, Directorate of Census Operations, Gujarat, Census of India, 2011).

**Women and religious observance**

As stated earlier, women play a vital role in religious observance. Women of African descent like women elsewhere have been the guardians of the religious traditions. Sidi women, thus, tend to be more devout than their male counterparts and participate more actively in religious activities and prayers. They tend to frequent the dargah
(tombs and shrines) more often for prayers and worship and often their religious activities centre around the dargah of male saints. Women also play a leading role in the Urs festival and in the performance of dance, devotional songs and sacrifices. In addition to Baba Ghor, the Sidi women venerate Mai Mishra, his sister who is associated with the powers of fertility. Even today Sidi women in Ahmedabad perform ‘basti’, a ritual during the month of Ramadan, during the course of which they sing ‘zikr’ accompanied by Mai Mishra rattles (Micklem 2001:41). Basu describes the role of Sidi women in the Urs celebration in Sindh, Pakistan. The annual ritual performance called bhoja honours and celebrates Mai Mishra, sister of Baba Ghor who is associated with fertility and procreation. This indicates that among the Sidis, female saints occupy a prominent place (Basu, ‘Theatre of Memory: Ritual Kinship Performances of the African Diaspora in Pakistan’ 2001:249). Mai Mishra is one of the seven female saints who along with the eleven male saints is venerated as being the ancestors of the Sidis. According to legend, Baba Ghor had four sisters, all of whom are revered. They include Mai Mishra, Mai Bharosi, Mai Parshan and Mamai. The latter is worshipped in a special ceremony called ‘Mamai madh’ (Gupta 1991:217).

Sidi women also actively participate in rituals of spirit possession known as ‘valgad’ or ‘vai’, which have as their objective the exorcism of evil spirits and the curing of sickness and disease. Sidi women play a central role in the rituals centred on the various rites of passage, some of which are described below.

Menstruation

The beginning of menstruation is treated as the sign of puberty among the Sidis and celebrated with special rituals. It is also a signal to the parents to commence the search for a suitable mate for their daughter. The onslaught of the first menstruation is known as ‘Pahela sir mela hona’ or ‘Nahani ani’. Among the Sidis of south Gujarat, it is known as ‘Odhani Odhana’, or the donning of the headscarf, also ‘chheti bethi’ (sitting at a distance). The latter is a reference to the fact that during this time, she is isolated and made to sit on jute (gunny) bags for about six days and prohibited from cooking or touching anything. This probably is an adaptation from Hindu traditions in which a menstruating woman is considered ritually impure. After seven days, she is given a bath and her hair is washed. She is assisted by several female relatives and also adorned with garlands of flowers.
Marriage customs

Sidi jamaats have endeavoured to maintain the purity of the blood through endogamous marriages and consequently marriage outside of the clan is prohibited. In the past Sidis were required to marry within the community, the one exception being the Sidis of Jafarabad who intermarried only with members of the Muslim aristocracy or Nawabs (Bhaigotar 2008:86). There are some interesting references in the nineteenth century to African women who became queens or consorts of nawabs or rulers. These include Meher Lekta Begum, the third wife of the nawab of Bengal, Sayyid Mansur Ali Khan (1838–1880), and Yasmin Mahal, one of the wives of Wajid Ali Shah, the last king of Oudh who is represented in a number of royal paintings. Others include Guiti Afroz Mahal, a former slave and later the third wife of the nawab of Oudh and Bamba Muller (1848–1887), who married the last ruler of the Sikh Empire in Northern India and was given the title of ‘Maharani Bamba’ (Mishra, ‘Shades of Africa in India’s Social Fabric’, Deccan Herald, 16 October 2014. www.deccanherald epaper.com, accessed 8 July, 2015). Bamba Muller was the daughter of Ludwig Muller, a German banker, by his mistress Sofia who was said to be of Abyssinian descent.

The Sidis follow the practice of arranged marriages and traditionally marriage with someone bearing the same surname was not allowed. Intermarriage and miscegenation, where it occurred was generally among the lower classes, consisted of Habshi-Indian mixing. As early as 1883 there is a mention in the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, which mentions the ‘Marathi Sidis’ who are described as ‘a branch of the Goa Sidis . . . dark with broad thick lips, curly beards and hair, and slanting foreheads . . . hardworking and robust . . .’ (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Kanara Dist. Vol. 15, Part 1 1883:397). The Gazetteer also refers to the fact that the Marathi Sidis observe Hindu festivals such as Holi, Yugadi and Shravani as well as Diwali (Ibid.).

The Rajput surnames of many Sidis, like Parmar, Makwana, Darbar, Rathod, Mari, Kankad, Nobi etc. suggest their ancestral affinity to Raiput clans and dynasties whereas other surnames denote their ancestral affinity with seafaring coastal communities and linkages with Muslim nawab families. These include names like Miyava, Jamburi, Vajuguru, Mandida, Badshah, Soibi, Badran, Naubi, Mazjgula and Murugasa.

Among the Sidis cross-cousin marriages are preferred and the children of a brother and sister and of two sisters can intermarry, however, often forms of consanguine marriages are not permitted. The Sidis practice levirate as well as sororate referred to as Devarvatu and Diyartarni, respectively (Singh, People of India: Gujarat 2003).
Engagement ceremony

As per Islamic tradition, the initial overture is made by the prospective bridegroom’s family called ‘sagai mangani’ (literally translated as ‘offer of an engagement’). On the appointed day, the boy’s party pays a visit to the home of the girl and receives a warm welcome. The girl who is adorned with new clothes and ornaments is given a gift of chundadi (scarf) or ghatadi by the boy’s aunt. The occasion is celebrated with song and food.

While practicing Muslim religion, Sidis, nevertheless, have adopted and adapted several Hindu customs. Just prior to the marriage, turmeric powder or haldi is anointed on the bride’s body. This ritual known as Pithi Cholavi is accompanied by the singing of marriage songs. On the appointed day of the wedding, the groom’s wedding party arrives in a procession at the bride’s home and is accorded a warm welcome, accompanied by the beating of drums and the use of brass and wind instruments. They are also treated to refreshments consisting of tea and snacks. This welcome is known as samaiya. Thereafter, the marriage ceremony is conducted by the Kazi, or a Muslim judge according to Islamic tradition and is known as Nikah Padhana. Witnesses from both the groom’s and the bride’s side are present and permission of the jamaat is required for the marriage.

An aromatic nut along with medicinal herbs, mindhol, is tied around the wrist of the bridegroom’s right hand in a rite called Mindhol Bandhan, a custom also practiced by Hindus.

For the marriage ceremony, the bridegroom wears new clothes, which includes surval (a type of trousers) and a sword attached to the waist. My informant – an elderly leader responding to a question, however, told me that nowadays, many Sidi bridegrooms wear western clothes, namely shirts and trousers (personal communication, 13 May 2012). The bride is adorned in red garments (the colour associated with auspiciousness), which consist of paizama (trousers) and odhani (scarf). The consent of the bride and groom is essential before the marriage ceremony can proceed. The gifts, cash and clothing bought by the maternal side are offered to the bride and are known as mameru. This too reflects borrowing from Gujarati Indian customs.

Pregnancy and childbirth

During the last few months of pregnancy, a ceremony is performed called Khola Bharana or Simant, when the wife is given gifts and a
ritual feast takes place. The newborn child is seen as a gift from Allah and on the third day following birth, family and friends come to visit the newborn bearing gifts for the mother and child. On the sixth day referred to as chhatthi, the child is given a name. The borrowing of certain Hindu social customs by the Sidis is thus evident from their adoption of the practice of pithi, simant, mandap, mameru etc. but also their use of certain linguistic terms to denote kinship patterns such as dikro (son), gharwali (wife), kaka (uncle), bhanej (nephew), vevai (in-laws) and fua (husband of father’s sister). There is a tiny village called Mandal, a few miles outside of Mahuva on coastal Saurashtra region, which is home to several Sidi families who have settled there. Among them when a pregnant woman approaches the time of delivery, she is taken to the ocean and given a bath. After she has bathed with seawater, they return home with a vessel of seawater. This is placed in one corner of the house. When the child is born, the newborn is given a bath using that water from the sea. When the women return from the ocean carrying this water, they sing a song that contains both Swahili and Gujarati words. The song says,

Allah malik dangora
Dariye jaja dangora
ghadili aav dangora
bal navrav dangora
Allah malik dangora

The above folksong reflects the borrowing of Swahili words in the folksongs of the Sidis. This song represents an appeal to God (Allah) to give blessing to the newborn infant who will be given a bath with the waters of the ocean, which are believed to have a purificatory effect.

A midwife or Dayan assists the birth of the child. In accordance with Islamic practice, the infant male child undergoes circumcision, called sunnat or akika that requires the shaving of the child’s head. Generally, this circumcision or removal of the foreskin is performed by the barber and is followed by communal feasting which entails qurbani or the ritual sacrifice of a goat that should be of one colour.

Divorce

Divorce is not possible without the consent of the jamaat. In case of divorce, the custody of the children is given to the husband. If the children are too young, the mother looks after them until they are of age.
This is consistent with Islamic practice in which the children belong to the lineage of the father.

Thus, it is evident from the above discussion that Sidi social customs and practices represent an amalgam of Hindu and Muslim traditions with some residue survivals from their African past. It reflects to a very large extent, the process of acculturation at work in a community, which has adapted and borrowed from the mainstream society. What distinguishes the roles and status of Sidi women in India is the importance placed on female saints as founders and the ritual space created for them as ancestors of the Sidis (Basu 2000:249). Along with Baba Ghor, his sisters are revered by the Sidis. Basu correctly points out that elements of kinship and marriage become the vehicle for remembering and honouring the women of the African diaspora (Ibid. 264).

While little or no mention is found about Sidi women in historical records, recent research by scholars promises to shed new light on this much overlooked subject. Women of African descent have been viewed primarily in the role of concubines and household slaves. Research indicates that in states such as Oudh, the African women were recruited as bodyguards and valued for their bravery and loyalty. The Nawab Wajid Ali Khan employed African women as personal bodyguards and these female African fighters were organised into a female platoon who wore short pleated skirts over loose trousers to enable them to ride horses. During the Mutiny of 1857, when Indian troops rebelled against the British and attempted to overthrow them, a number of African slaves, men as well as women loyal to the nawab participated in the fighting. Official records suggest that Africans fired upon British troops from trees and rooftops. Among those who died valiantly were many African women. In the words of a British officer, ‘they fought like wild cats, and it was not till after they were killed that their sex was even suspected’ (Llewelyn-Jones 2007:42). Even more significantly a handful of them became wives, notably during the reign of Wajid Ali Khan, the last ruler who is said to have been particularly attracted to dark-skinned women. He was reputed to have had 375 wives among whom mention is made of Fizzah, the Abyssinian who was given the title of ‘Jahanara’ or queen (Ibid. 134). Other Africans who are mentioned include Yasmin Mahal, whom the nawab married in 1843 and Ajaib Khanum, also known as Hazrat Mahal (Ibid. 137). According to the Ishqnamah, the two latter wives also appear in the royal paintings. Similarly, some of the wives of the rulers of the state of Janjira also claimed African descent.

Little or no mention is made of Sidis in Gujarati literature, either in biographies or fictional works. The three short stories contained in the
book *Sidi ane Katechi Vartao* (see Chapter 11, pp. 14–15) focus on the inner strength and resilience of the female characters in the stories providing a much needed glimpse into the perception and portrayal of Sidi women.

Sidi women also play a prominent role in the Urs ceremonies and the Dhamal dances particularly those that were intended to induce the spirit of divination. A number of these are danced to the accompaniment of a high-pitched pipe and drums. Both men and women participate, the latter often playing a prominent role, ‘in the middle of the dancing-circle stands the Sidi patelni or head woman of the tribe, now beating time to the rhythm of the music, now encouraging the dancers with loud words of approval or slapping a drummer to arouse his failing energy’ (Bombay City Gazetteer 1901:191). This description suggests that Sidi women were not necessarily passive but often played a vital role in the ceremonies and dances.

Despite the constraints of poverty and lack of education, Sidi girls are increasingly aspiring to become educated and seek employment. One such success story is that of Rozina Chotiyara, a twenty-seventy-year-old who was born and brought up in the Gir forest of Gujarat. She has the distinction of being the first Sidi woman to become a forest ranger responsible for the protection of the lion population in the Gir forest (*Times of India* ‘Gujarat’s Pride safe in Siddi woman’s hands’ 22 June 2016, accessed 20 November 2016). A handful of Sidi women have also distinguished themselves in sports, especially in athletics, such as Kamala Babu Siddi who broke an international record and brought glory to her country.

More research on the roles and contributions of Sidi women will undoubtedly unearth valuable material that can shed light on these previously ‘invisible’ women of the Sidi community.

**Notes**

1 The Hadrami Sheikhdom is now a part of the Republic of Yemen.
2 The term ‘mindhol’ comes from ‘madan fal’ meaning the fruit of love.
3 ‘Allah Malik’ can be translated as ‘God is the lord, God is the sole owner’.
4 The term ‘dariye’ refers to the ocean while the word ‘navrav’ means to bathe.

4 The Sidis regard the seven females and eleven males as their founding ancestors.
Historically, the term ‘diaspora’ referred to the forcible dispersal of
the Jews. However, it has been used at different times and in differ-
ent contexts to describe the migrations of Greeks in the Mediterra-
nean world as well as those of the Armenians, Palestinians, Asians and
the movement of other peoples across national and state borders. In
recent times, this term has gained currency and is applied to the move-
ments of peoples both voluntary and involuntary, all over the world.
It evokes the ‘scattering’ of peoples globally and has become, increas-
ingly, the subject of academic research and discourse. There is little
consensus among scholars as to the definition of this phenomenon,
which remains a highly contested and controversial subject. However,
there is general agreement that displaced and dispersed communities
share certain characteristics. This applies equally to the millions of
Africans who for more than a millennia voluntarily or involuntar-
ily left their homelands and found themselves in unfamiliar lands as
‘strangers’.

Diasporic African communities, like their counterparts elsewhere
faced the challenges of having to construct new identities while mak-
ing necessary adjustments and adaptations in their new environment.
As Ruth Simmons Hamilton points out, ‘All global African peoples
have struggled to be subjects of their own history: to establish places
and spaces of meaning and material survival; to create institutions that
offer venues for and visions of a just society, by which and in which
to live their lives’ (Hamilton 2006:7). The descendants of Africans
also shared with other migrants, a deeply emotional and often highly
romanticised image of their land of origin and sometimes the fanta-
sised dream of ‘return’. Moreover, they were confronted with the dif-
cult and often irreconcilable decisions of how much of their culture,
religion, world views, language and beliefs to preserve and the extent
of acculturation necessary to survive in the new environment. These
often represented painful choices. Diasporic studies also need to focus on individual and collective memory of peoples and what they reveal about their experiences as slaves, migrants and dispersed communities. Slave narratives, where available, represent an invaluable source for exploring individual and collective memory and recollections of the homeland. Furthermore, they shed valuable light on issues such as identity formation, cultural survivals and change. Despite the extensive scholarly literature on the diasporic experience, our understanding of the subject remains at best, limited.

**Diasporic Africans in India**

The dispersal and displacement of Africans in Asia is unique in certain ways and differed from the experience of Africans in the New World because they did not share a common language, religion or ethnicity nor did they all come from the same geographical region. Furthermore, many of the Africans who came to India were first taken to the Red Sea ports or the Persian Gulf and were then transported to India. This phenomenon of multiple displacements and resettlement has been termed ‘circulatoriness’ (Ibid. 2).

As Basu (2004) has pointed out, the Sidis are unique to the extent that unlike slaves in other parts of the world, their rituals and historical narratives contain no mention of slavery nor is there any mention of slave ancestors or founders in their narratives. In my oral interviews with Sidis, no mention was made of their past as enslaved people. Rather, they have appropriated positive status symbols by designating themselves as ‘badshah’ or royalty and associating their founding fathers with saints and revered figures such as Hazrat Bilal and Baba Ghor. While, the rulers of Janjira and Sachin were fully conscious of their African ancestry, they maintained their separate identity by contracting marriages only with other princely families, landlord nobility or upper-class Muslims.

**Cultural retention and the challenge of forging new identities**

The Sidis arrived in India over a period of more than 700 years and they came from different parts of the African continent. As a result, unlike other migrants who came in large groups, they could not very easily retain their cultures. The challenge for them, thus, was to establish and in some cases to forge new identities both as individuals and collectively.
Over centuries, the Sidis have devised various strategies and mechanisms to adjust to and acculturate in their adopted homelands. The descendants of Africans in India, many of whom had converted to Islam either before or after arrival in India identified with and gave their allegiance to Islam. This was often a pragmatic and necessary choice since it facilitated their acceptance into and gave them a place in Indian society. While slavery as an institution was widely prevalent in Islamic societies, the slave enjoyed some protection under the religion. They were not seen as mere chattel, but recognised as possessing a soul and could be accepted into the faith. Quranic injunctions also called for the humane treatment of slaves and manumission was viewed as a meritorious act. Islam also did not compel its converts to abandon their traditional beliefs and practices, thereby providing an avenue for assimilation.

In many instances, especially during the period of the sultanate, conversion to Islam enabled them to acquire power and high positions and provided possibilities for upward mobility. Those who rose to positions of power often strengthened and reinforced their African identities by recruiting other Africans in their armies, an example being Malik Ambar, the de facto ruler of the kingdom of Ahmadnagar in the Deccan. He is said to have recruited as many as 10,000 Ethiopian slaves for his army (Mamdani 2013).

For centuries, the Sidis assimilated and absorbed the cultures and languages of the societies in which they found themselves. The Sidis of Gujarat speak Gujarati, those in South India speak Kannada, in Hyderabad and Pakistan the Sidis speak mainly Urdu while Sidis in the Portuguese territories could converse in Portuguese. They borrowed and appropriated local practices in their religious beliefs. An example of this is the worship of the goddess Yellamma, a South Indian deity in Karnataka and the adoption of Christian practices in Goa and the former Portuguese territories. The Sidis also celebrate Hindu, Muslim and Catholic festivals such as Holi and Diwali, Muharram and Christmas.¹ The Sidis in India faced some additional challenges. Not all of them were involuntary migrants or descendants of slaves. Some came as sailors, mercenaries and household servants and thus, the community lacked cohesiveness.² There are also striking differences between Sidis and other Indians, both in terms of physical characteristics as well as religious affiliations and value systems. Yet, they have made linguistic, political, cultural and social accommodations.

They have also had to confront the challenge of racial discrimination, the stigma of association with slavery and their marginalised status in Indian society. Many of them have been brought into the
stratification system of caste and class, which is such an integral aspect of Indian society. As scholars have pointed out, the Sidis in Bilki and Yellapur districts of Karnataka view themselves as Hindus and consider themselves as superior to their neighbours, the Bandhis and Namdharis who are hunters and pastoralists (Chauhan 1995:241). Like other Hindus, they also follow prohibitions against interdining with members of the lower castes.

As regards cultural retentions, the Sidis of Karnataka like many inhabitants of Africa have extensive knowledge of their natural environment, especially plant and animal life. This knowledge has been transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. They employ it in their practice of folk medicine, to cure illness, induce fertility, ward off the evil eye and prevent pregnancy. Consequently, other Sidis as well as the non-Sidi populations seek their services. Equally, the Sidis also rely on the local folk medicine and practices of the Hindus. An example of this is the veneration of the popular deity Hanuman in Jambur by the Sidis who make offerings of sindur or vermilion to the image of this deity. They also worship local goddesses like Meladi Mata and Sitala Mata to ward off small pox and other illnesses (Gupta 1991:218).

Identity formation

The concept of ‘Diasporic identity’ is neither new nor solely applicable to the descendants of Africans in the New World. It finds its earliest expression in the memoirs of Olaudah Equiano, as early as 1789, whose narratives eloquently describe his enslavement, subsequent emancipation and the evolution of an Afro-British identity.3

For centuries, the Sidis assimilated and absorbed the culture and languages of the societies in which they found themselves; however, in recent times they have more consciously been asserting their African identities and their ties to their original homeland. Furthermore, like other diasporic communities, the Sidis also constructed multiple identities. Thus, they define themselves as Gujaratis, Indians, Muslims and scheduled tribes. As Muslims, they made a distinction between the locally born, whom they referred to as muwallads and recent immigrants, called wilaitis or foreigners.4 One way in which their unique African identity manifests itself is by keeping alive their musical and dance traditions and cultural practices such as veneration of ancestors and spirit possession as well as adopting names of their places of origins. This form of cultural memory served to challenge the prevailing notion of their insignificance and worthlessness, ultimately constituting a form of rebellion.
Thus, one encounters among the Sidis, this ongoing struggle to define and articulate their individual as well as collective identities. This is reflected in the interplay of the twin forces of continuity and change in their culture. In many cases the Sidis have effectively constructed multiple identities, which have enabled them to navigate between the two cultures. The Sidis were quite effective in creating public and private spaces for themselves, enabling them to survive in a new land. This is an area that warrants further examination and study and would contribute to a better understanding of diasporic communities.

**Discrimination and prejudice**

In dealing with the Sidis of India, it is imperative to examine their place in the hierarchically structured, caste-dominated and colour-conscious society of India. Despite claims to the contrary, the caste system, which has been in existence for more than 2,000 years has been a powerful factor in shaping the socially constructed identity of those who live in India and this includes the Sidis. There has been little serious exploration, discussion or scholarly discourse on what it means to be ‘African’ and ‘Black’ in India. Unfortunately, the subject of racism and discrimination has to a great extent been absent in the moral discourse in India, unlike the continuing discussion on untouchability and its implications on Indian society. Thus, one may ask, did the descendants of the Africans who came and settled in India over centuries suffer overt or covert discrimination because they were perceived as descendants of slaves, in addition to being black or Negroid? Have they suffered because of their racial distinctiveness? What types of stereotypes prevail in the minds of the mainstream Indian society? Is the marginalisation of the Sidi population due to the colour of their skin, that is, physiognomy or because of their economic backwardness and lack of education?

Information on these issues is mostly scattered and anecdotal, especially in the absence of in-depth survey data and studies. Moreover, the sensitive nature of the subject dealing with popular perceptions, prejudices and discrimination makes it difficult for researchers to address these issues. However, some tentative observations can be made from commonly held views which while acknowledging the physical stamina, courage, loyalty and musical talents of the Sidis, nevertheless reveals stereotyping and deeply ingrained prejudices in the minds of the majority of the population, reflected in the sayings such as the following:

‘Sidi bhai ne Sidka wahla’
(A derogatory saying in the Gujarati language, which implies that Sidis like others only feel fondness for their own little ones.)
‘Habshi nu naak motu’
(Habshis have big noses.)
‘Sidi Bhaiyo saw man sabue nhay, to pan kala ne kala.’
(This saying states that even if the Sidis bathe using hundred tons of soap, they will always remain black in colour.)
‘Sidi bhai dabo kan pakde’
(Implying that Sidis tend to be ignorant and will do things the difficult way.)

Similarly in Pakistan, people harbour negative stereotypes about the Sidis and consider them jahil meaning ignorant and worse, call them jungli meaning wild (Albinia 2008: 53).

Indians settled in Africa as well as those in Gujarat and elsewhere in India refer to the Africans and Sidis as Kaliya, meaning dark – a derogatory term in a society where fairness is equated with beauty. There is no denying that in recent times there is a marked preference among the majority of Indians and Pakistanis for fair skin colour, demonstrated in the countless matrimonial advertisements that convey the desire for fair-skinned spouses. Increasingly widespread use and popularity of many whitening creams and cosmetics advertised on TV and popular media also reflect this penchant for fairness.

The perceptions and views of Africans or people of African descent varied depending on geographical region, and whether they were free or slaves. The writings of travellers like the Dutch Jan Huyghen Linschoten (1563–1611) reveal much about the colour prejudice and popular perceptions regarding Africans and reinforced stereotypes that in many cases have continued to persist. Jan Huygen van Linschoten, a protestant merchant who travelled to Goa in the sixteenth century wrote extensively about the encounters between whites and non-whites in Goa and the resulting racial attitudes that were commonplace. He describes both the revulsion and the fascination for the dark-skinned Africans and states that the Caffares or Kaffirs are like the ‘beasts’. Describing the slaves from Mozambique he states that they are ‘black as pitch, with curled and hayre both on their heads and beards, which is very little, their broad, flat and thicke at the end, great bigge lippes: some have holes, above and under in their lippes’ (Linschoten, Vol. 1, 1970:271).

Similar observations can be found in the writings of the seventeenth-century French traveller, Francois Pyrard de Laval who describes the women in the markets of Goa and states, ‘Some of these girls are very pretty, fair, and comely, others are olive colored, brown and of all colors. But those to whom they are most attracted are the Caffre girls
of Mozambique and other places in Africa who are as wondrously black, with curly hair: they call these Negra de Guinea.’ He further continues to elaborate on their body odours and states that ‘the Negroes of Africa, from both sides of the Cape of Good Hope, stink in such wise that when they are heated it is impossible to approach them: their savour is as bad as that of green leeks’ (*The Voyage of Francois Pyrard de Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*, translated into English and edited by Albert Gray Vol. 1. 1887).

When Britain established colonial rule over India, the attitudes and prejudices against the Africans worsened. Writing about those descended from Africans, Burton in a report to the British Government wrote ‘Formerly great numbers of Zanzibarees, Bombasees, and Hubshees (Abyssinians) found their way into Sind . . . all of them are celebrated for their thievish, drunken, and fighting propensities’ (cited in Albinia 2008:60). Burton’s prejudices reappear in his other writings, namely in *Sind Revisited* published in 1877, in which he referred to the African commanders of Janjira as ‘pirates’ and ‘sea-thugs’ (Ibid.) These kinds of negative perceptions are also evident in the writings of other travellers and officials.

Stereotypes, misconceptions and misrepresentations about the Sidis continue to persist and are perpetuated in popular perception, as well as in the scholarly literature and sadly, in the Gujarat State school textbooks, which reinforce these beliefs. Among these can be found the idea that Sidis reside in the forests because they come from the African continent. This reflects the inaccurate assumption that all Sidis in India live in the forests. In reality, only a small population of Sidis resides in the Gir and Karnataka forest regions. Moreover, this erroneous belief also views the African continent as comprising of dense forest – a view that does not acknowledge the tremendous diversity and variety of vegetation and climate in Africa! An example of such statements is, ‘The Sidis were originally the habitants of the forests of Africa. The whites caught them and sold them to European countries as slaves. They are dark black in complexion, their lips are very thick, nose flat and their hair are curly’ (Vyas 1998:301 cited in Micklem 2001).

The above statement also overlooks the fact that African slaves were brought to India not primarily by the Whites, but also by the Arabs and the Hindu traders and merchants. To cite another example of similar inaccuracies, one can examine the content of the State textbooks, which state, ‘. . . and more, there are the Black Siddis found mainly in the Gir forest area in Saurashtra. They are followers of Islam. It is believed that people of this race were originally from Africa brought over to this region as slaves by the Europeans in the past. They are
black in appearance and have thick lips, with flat, broad nose, and kinky hair...’ (Dixit et al. 1997:112).

Another popular stereotype is that Sidis are ignorant with little inclination to get an education. One text states, ‘The Sidis have a real aversion for formal education. They prefer to lead a carefree life’ (Chakraborty and Nandi 1984:132). Once again, such broad sweeping comments do not take into account the complexity and diversity of the Sidi population nor the realities of poverty and marginalisation as a barrier to educational aspirations.

Many of these and similar stereotypes survive into the present. The Sidis have responded to such negative perceptions by referring to themselves as ‘Badshah’ and ‘fakirs’ and relating themselves to royalty and holy men. Their songs and dances also reveal their pride in their heritage and an assertion of their ‘Africanness’. An example of this is the following song:

On the Mother’s mountain we have lots of fun  
Curly, curly hair  
When we are all at Blessed Mother’s  
We have lots of fun after eating dal and rice  
Curly, curly hair  
We dance the dammal and have fun  
Curly, curly hair

(Cited in Catlin-Jairazbhoy in Sidis and Scholars 2004:181)

Thus, the majority of the Sidis in India have been victims of discrimination and racial prejudice. They have been marginalised, overlooked or forgotten. It is only in recent years that a handful of scholars have begun the task of documenting their history and contributions to Indian society.

Sidis in Gujarati literature

There are unfortunately very few sources in Gujarati literature for the study of the Sidis. As far as can be ascertained, there exists nothing comparable to the diary, and first-hand accounts of former slaves such as Equiano whose travel accounts and writings provide rich materials for the study of the Atlantic slave trade. Very little is available to scholars for reconstructing the Indian Ocean slave trade. This paucity of local sources can be explained by the fact that the Sidis in India were relatively few in numbers. They came from different regions
of the continent of Africa and lacked cohesion and a clearly defined sense of African identity. They were also not all slaves but came over a period of 1,000 years – as soldiers, slaves, crewmen, sailors, pearl divers, concubines and bodyguards. Many of them had already converted to Islam before they arrived or subsequently were absorbed into the Islamic community because of their adherence to Islam. Lack of education, high rate of illiteracy and poverty also explain why we have such few accounts of their experiences in India.

Unlike the emancipated slaves in the New World who wrote accounts of their experiences in English, the Sidis of India have not provided us with first-hand accounts. They lacked the language and tools to document their lives – a major loss to historians and researchers. In the personal statements and testimonies of the newly emancipated or freed slaves, some of which are cited by Harris in his pioneering study (Harris 1971:129–133) none of them expressed a desire to return to Africa, with the exception of one woman by the name of Zafran who said that ‘she worked to be liberated and sent back to Jeddah where I am desirous of residing’ (Ibid. 130).

One notable exception to this lack of source materials on and by Sidis, however, is a book published in 1972 in Gujarati by Sidi Abdula bin Mubarak entitled My Journey to East Africa. This is an account by Sidi Abdula, a resident of Bhavnagar, in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat. He had served as private secretary to the maharaja of the princely state of Bhavnagar. The author accompanied by another Sidi, Suleman Mujaver Rickshawalla travelled to Kenya and Tanzania in 1970, a trip that was sponsored and paid for by an Indian settled in East Africa. While the book provides some interesting material, it does not provide insights into questions central to the historian – especially those which address issues of identity, of what it means to be ‘African’ or ‘Indian’; the subject of colour prejudice, discrimination and racism; and sentiments of Pan-Africanism.

Sidi Abdula’s book and trip to East Africa appear to reaffirm that the majority of Indians of African descent view themselves as ‘Indians’ and in this case ‘Gujaratis’ while retaining a vague sense of emotional attachment to the land of their ancestors and origin. Black dock-workers in Karachi, as well as schoolteachers and merchants in East Africa, extended their hospitality and friendship to the author. While this reinforced the bonds that link people of Africa, the journey did not arouse in him any desire to return back to the African homeland. This suggests that after centuries of living in India, they considered it their home. The author also interacted mainly with African officials,
bureaucracy and the more educated and affluent Africans and contact with the ordinary East African was limited.

Abdula bin Mubarak’s account also fails to shed light on the important subject of what it means to be ‘African’ and ‘black’ in India. Rather, it probably serves as a validation of his own privileged standing in the Sidi community of Bhavnagar. The discussion in the book of his fellow companion’s misbehaviour hints at the tensions and differences which exist among the different classes of Sidis which serve as a deterrent to unity and sense of cohesion among the community.

There is another published work in Gujarati entitled Sidi ané Katechi Vartao (Sidi and Kutchi tales) which can yield some useful material on the Sidis’ social structure as well as linguistic data regarding the differences between Gujarati spoken by the Sidis and the Kutchi dialect. The three short stories Namé Kuro (meaning – what is in a name), Fatmabai and Jari Vijari provide some interesting information on Sidi life. A critical examination of the content and theme of these stories reveals a common underlying theme – the inner strength, resilience and capabilities of women. No matter what difficulties the women face, they rise to the challenge and accomplish their goals. These folktales of the Sidis, if explored in-depth, may provide greater insight into Sidi culture, especially women’s lives.

Sidis are also mentioned cursorily in some Gujarati novels and short stories in which they are depicted as strong, dark-skinned and brave men often in the role of bodyguards, chowkidars (watchmen) and strong men. This reference to the Sidi guards is often in fictional narratives that deal with dacoits and outlaws. Their African origins are alluded to, but seldom explored.

Thus, Gujarati literature does not shed much light on the Sidi community and their culture and often tends to perpetuate the existing stereotypes and misconceptions regarding Africa and Africans. One can only hope that in the future, the younger generation of Sidis who have the benefit of education will write about their experiences and culture, thereby providing new insight and understanding of the Sidis.

The Obama election and the Sidi response

While the Sidis in India have to some extent been absorbed into mainstream Indian culture, they have by no means abandoned their African identities. This was made eminently clear in 2008 when Barack Obama won the US Presidential election to become the first person of African descent to occupy the White House. The response of the
Sidi community to this event was unprecedented. They identified with Obama as a fellow African and the election victory created a mood of euphoria and optimism in the community.

The Sidis of Ahmedabad who reside in the Patthar Kuva area of Ahmedabad celebrated with song and dance. They viewed Obama’s victory as their own. ‘He is our man and we are sure that he will be a great leader’, said one of the community leaders, Siddi Rumana Myawar (‘Way to GO – Bama!’ http://www.expressindia.com/story_print, accessed 15 March 2009). She went on to reiterate that Sidis who have been neglected by the government and struggle to make both ends meet now will be inspired to join politics. Sidis who live in poverty and illiteracy hope for better lives as a consequence of President Obama’s victory. Obama’s victory provided new hope for the Sidis in India. As Nasreen Siddi, a member of the community stated, ‘If not much, I feel he will do at least something for the Siddis in India. He is a youth icon and so he should encourage youth participation in industries and politics. We also want to become successful like him, if not a President than at least have a decent job and a good name in the society’ (Ibid. 2). It is clear from the above statements that Obama’s victory provided hope and higher aspirations to descendants of Africans everywhere, including the Sidis.

During the US Presidential elections, the Sidis in Gujarat sat glued to their televisions to witness the making of history. It was an occasion for adhimisho – a celebration in Swahili expressed through the Dharmal dance. ‘Ultimately, he is one of us’ was the sentiment of these Sidis (Times of India, 7 November 2008:1). Vali Mohammed Makwana, the leader of the Sidi community in the village of Talala, Junagadh district in Gujarat said, ‘We had been reading newspapers and there were reports that Obama who hailed from our motherland would win. We are now Indian but if any one from our motherland becomes the first citizen of U.S it is a matter of pride for us’ (Ibid. 1).

What is interesting in this statement is the use of the word ‘motherland’ for Africa – a sentiment that conveys a sense of identification with the African continent and a consciousness of Pan-Africanism. Another member of the Sidi community said, ‘Like us, Obama is an African. If he is an African-American, we too are African-Indian. Lets see what he does for this country, but one thing is sure he will do well for our community. We all are happy with his victory’ (Ibid.). In the forest of Gir in Gujarat, which is home to a large community of Sidis, the Sidis celebrated at the Nagarchi Pir Dargah with dance and performed African rhythms on their drums. Through the night, they offered prayers (dua) for Obama. Iqbal Bagas, a Sidi youth expressed
the sentiments of his people when he said, ‘It is a never before moment for us. We are overjoyed.’ Ahmedbhai Makwana, a leader of the Sidis said, ‘Obama shares our African roots. He is our man, and he is now ruling the world’s only superpower. Once upon a time we Sidis were slaves too. We were almost untouchables in most parts of the world. This is a great moment for us, as our man has gone that far’ (Times of India, 22 January 2009:2).

The nearly 12,000 Sidis living in Gujarat celebrated President Obama’s victory with ecstatic enthusiasm and fireworks (Jani, Obama ni jeet no jashu Junagadh man Utsav12, 22 November 2008). The leader of Rajkot’s Sidi community, Hothibhai Musagra, announced that when Mr. Obama takes the oath of office on 20 January, the entire Sidi population would dance and celebrate in their tribal costumes. Hira-bai [ben] Ibrahim Bachubhai Makwana, a community leader from Jambur said, ‘Obama’s victory is our victory’ (Jani 2008).

The Sidis also expressed hope that with President Obama’s victory, discrimination and prejudice towards non-whites will be eradicated. The sentiments expressed by these Sidis echo those of millions of descendants of Africans scattered all over the world and reflect a renewed pride in their past and the forging of a Pan-African identity.

Like the Sidis of Gujarat, those of Karnataka’s Haliyal district also rejoiced and celebrated the inauguration of President Obama as the President of the United States. This included the entire Sidi community scattered in the districts of Yellapur, Mundgod, Ankola, Sirsi, Joida and Karwar in Uttara Kannada district and Kalghatgi region of Dharwar. These Sidis take particular pride in Obama as the President of the United States and regard him as one of them – someone with whom they share a common African ancestry. One of the Sidi leaders was said to be spearheading an effort to send a jar of honey collected by them as a gift to the new President (Vibhute, ‘Sweet gift for Obama from Karnataka’s Siddis’, The Indian Express 2009).

Thus, this occasion served to reinforce their ties to the African continent and reflects their pride in their African ancestry. In recent times they have more consciously been asserting their African identities and their ties to their original homeland. The response of the Sidi communities in India to President Obama’s victory is significant because it is an indication that Sidis are now linking both politically and even culturally with people of African descent around the world.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the cultural interactions between Sidis and the world, including visits to the African continent. An example of this is the participation of the Sidi Goma musical troupes at the Zanzibar Festival of the Dhow Countries and
the warm welcome they received in Mombasa and Nairobi in 2003 (Alpers 2003). These developments are indicative of a growing awareness of a Pan-African identity. The emergence of the sentiment of Pan-Africanism is a recent phenomenon that warrants further examination and study.

Notes

1 The Hindu festival of Holi marks the advent of spring, while Diwali is the festival of lights that celebrates the triumph of good over evil.

2 Within the Indian subcontinent, there are the Sidis of Gujarat, the Kafira and Kafaro of Diu, the Sahali of Daman, the Sheedis, Afro-Baluchis and Makranis of Pakistan, Siddis of Bangladesh and the Kaffirs of Sri Lanka.

3 See the published autobiography, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, 1789, reprinted by Harper Collins.


5 This association of black or African with slave status is not unique to India but found elsewhere in the world. As Alpers pointed out in Madagascar, the Malagasy term for Africans Zazamanga reinforces this for zaza means child and manga means blue – tantamount to dark (Alpers 2000:87). This derogatory term is similar to the use of ‘boy’ and ‘negro’ for people of African descent in the United States.

6 This is a reference to the Portuguese in Goa.

7 To some extent, the Sidis themselves have perpetuated the idea that they are easy going. This is reflected in the common Sidi saying, ‘we are bindass’ (meaning ‘without worries’).
Until the independence of India, the Sidis were a mostly forgotten and marginalised community in India, living in poverty and relative obscurity. Their participation in the economy and political life has been limited and peripheral. There are some scholars who claim that the Sidis have achieved full socio-cultural integration in India. They support their argument by pointing out that the Sidis have adopted the language, food, dress and many of the customs practiced by the mainstream population. It is necessary to point out that despite this process of acculturation that has been taking place for several centuries, there are underlying differences and tensions. As a community, Sidis suffer from poverty, lack of education and high rates of unemployment or underemployment. They continue to feel isolated and politically marginalised and experience racial and colour discrimination. In the post-independence era, Sidis were invited to participate in the Independence Day celebrations and other functions to demonstrate India’s ethnic diversity and plural democracy. This was mainly in the form of their dances and music. Their integration and incorporation into Indian society was, however, more symbolic and mostly superficial. In the last few decades, there has been an increasing awareness among them to secure more rights and recognition.

Sidis in various parts of India took the first steps to organise themselves and demand greater rights. Some of them launched a protracted campaign for inclusion in the category of ‘scheduled tribes’. In 1986, the Sidis of Karnataka and Saurashtra (in the state of Gujarat) were classified as ‘scheduled tribes’, a status which opened up opportunities and preferential quotas in educational institutions and government jobs. Two years earlier, in cooperation with some Catholic groups, the Sidis of Karnataka established the All Karnataka Siddi Development Association and formed self-help groups called Sanghas, which
provided a forum for community discussion (Pashington 2007:165). These Sanghas or self-help organisations have been active in seeking aid from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to promote development and to attain greater land rights.

In Gujarat, numerous efforts were made by individuals and organisations to empower the Sidi community. Notable among these was the All India Sidi Community Federation led by Sikander Badshah who appealed to the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi for funds to build a facility to recruit and train Sidi athletes for international competitions (Ibid. 163).1 The Sports Authority of India actively tried to recruit some members of the Sidi community. Unfortunately, this effort to build on the reputation of Sidis for physical prowess and endurance did not realise its goals and the experiment was abandoned (Mickle 2001:38). An organised and sustained effort to promote Sidis as athletes was subsequently abandoned; however recently about eighty Sidis participated in a night marathon race in Surat. They competed with runners from the African continent and 50,000 Indians from Gujarat and other states (Times of India, 21 February 2014).

Other self-help organisations include, the Maha Gujarat Sidi Samaj Mahila Vikas Samiti,2 established to promote women’s welfare and development, and the Babaghor Sidi Samaj Mandal, a public trust organisation. In Bhavnagar, Farida Al Mumbrik has been more successful in her efforts to forge a common identity among the Sidis through the establishment of the Negro Welfare Board. Among its many activities, mention must be made of medical relief funds provided to impoverished and needy Sidis and a newsletter, which serves to create a sense of community through the dissemination of news pertaining to the people and events in the Sidi community (Shroff 2009: 164).

Mention must also be made of Hirabai Ibrahimbhai Lodi who has made a significant contribution to the well-being of her community by launching women’s groups or mandals, which assist its members to obtain microcredit from NGOs. They seek to obtain loans for small entrepreneurs.

In more recent years, as a result of the initiatives by the Government of India in cooperation with the Council of Cultural Relations, a few select members of the Sidi community have been able to travel to the African continent on cultural exchange trips. Rumanaben, a respected female community leader who recently returned from a trip to Senegal believes that contacts such as these serve to instil in them a renewed pride in and connection with their ancestral homeland. However, she reiterated that Sidis see themselves first and foremost as Gujaratis and Indians (Interview with Rumanaben, Ahmedabad, July 2011).
SIDI'S TODAY

Sidi community of Patthar Kuva in Ahmedabad

While the Sidi population of Gujarat is presently estimated to be around 20,000, the Sidis of Ahmedabad consist of 250 to 350 individuals,3 many of who live in the Patthar Kuva locality in Ahmedabad. At one time, according to estimates there were close to 5,000 Sidis in Ahmedabad alone (Commissariat 1938:469–471). Today, many of them work in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. They are street vendors, mechanics in repair shops, truck drivers, scooter rickshaw operators and construction workers. Others are painters, night watchmen, meat shop owners, boxers and street hawkers while women generally work at home. The general perception among them is that they are poor and marginalised and virtually forgotten or neglected by the rest of the population.

Since they are a small community, they lack power and feel marginalised. According to my informant Rumanaben Bilal, one of the more vocal and articulate leaders of this community, even the politicians have little interest in them except their votes during election time.

They are also keenly aware that having fewer children will make it possible to provide greater educational opportunities to them. Rumanaben stated that in the past, Sidis had many children but now it is not uncommon for them to opt for surgical procedure so that they will have only one or two children. According to her, many of the younger generation are interested in going to college and obtaining computer skills to increase their job prospects. The children I met in Patthar Kuva were bright-eyed and full of energy and optimism.

When asked about their identification with Africa and their African ancestors, the Sidis admitted they had no memory of Africa, but felt an emotional bond with the continent and its people.4 As a result of recent initiatives by the Government of India and the Council of Cultural Relations, selected members of the Sidi community have been able to travel to the African continent.

Sidis of Bhavnagar

There is a significant Sidi presence in Bhavnagar (Gujarat) today as in the past. Bhavnagar, a princely state enjoyed a strategic location on the west coast of India and was actively engaged in seafaring activities. Sidis who came and settled here were sailors, ship crews, soldiers and mercenaries. Bhavnagar enjoyed cordial relations with the State of Junagadh, which had a large population of African descendants. The nawab of Junagadh is said to have sent Sidis as a gift to the
Maharaja (ruler) of Bhavnagar. They served as gardeners, servants, personal attendants, royal guards and in domestic service. Thus, the Sidis played a significant role in the life of the state. The palace of Sihor, the erstwhile capital of Bhavnagar contains a wall painting that portrays Sidi Jhaver who gave his life in the service of the State and died fighting in the battle in the village of Tana during the reign of Vakhatcinhji (ca. late eighteenth century).

Today, the Sidi community of Bhavnagar promotes the welfare and interests of the Sidis through the Negro Welfare Board. The Sidis are organised on the basis of ‘jamaat’, the primary social institution that regulates behaviour and preserves their traditions and customs. Members of the Sidi community are also active in political parties and labour unions (Patel 1986:243). The Sidis also have their youth organisations like Ratanpur Yuvak Mandal, Vadva Sidi Yuvak Mandal and Sidi Rashtiya Yuvak Mandal. Sidis in Bhavnagar who are better organised also published a newsletter, the Sidi Samachar Patrika, now defunct. A large number of the Sidis in Bhavnagar are employed in the railways and many have clerical jobs, making them better off than Sidis elsewhere who often work as hawkers, drivers, mechanics and vendors.

In addition to the Sidi population residing in the urban areas of Gujarat like Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Jamnagar, Bhavnagar and Veraval, small groups of Sidis live in the villages of Jambur, Shirvan, Hadmatia, Javantri and Sasan.

**Sidis in the Gir Forest National Park**

While the total population of Sidis in Gujarat is estimated to be as large as 25,000, several thousand are said to reside in the region of Saurashtra. A number of Sidis settled in the Gir forest region of Saurashtra in western Gujarat whose descendants still reside in the forest, where they first arrived during the fourteenth century.

Today, there are a few villages comprising of Sidi populations in and around the Gir National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary in Saurashtra. This sanctuary has recently been designated as a world forest conservation area since it is home to the last surviving populations of Asiatic lions. These settlements of Sidis have been residing in this area for a very long period. They are mainly engaged in forestry work, honey collection, gathering of wood and other unskilled labour. They have lived in this area alongside other communities, namely the nomadic cattle herders – the Maldharis. There is a need to study and document the relationship between the Sidis and the other communities and how
they have adapted to and been impacted by the new forest conservation policies and regulations.

While most scholars believe that the Sidis came from the east coast of Africa, one legend has it that the Sidis of inland Gujarat originally came from Kano in Northern Nigeria, and ended up in India after undertaking a Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca (Whitehead 2000; Lodhi 1992). It has also been suggested that Africans who accompanied the Gujarati traders on their return from East Africa first populated Jambur. Notable among these was a merchant from Sagra village in Kodenjam region of Saurashtra. Another hypothesis is that the Sidis were brought here by the Arab invaders, especially the invading forces of Mahmud of Ghazni. Still others postulate that the Sidis of Jambur were followers of Baba Ghor who came here from Rajpipla. Thus, their exact origins are still a subject of controversy and debate.

**Sidis of Jambur village**

A hamlet known as Jambur in Junagadh district of Saurashtra is said to be populated entirely by the descendants of Africans, numbering 500 or so. The name Jambur is probably derived from *Jamoor/Jamoori* (hunting squad) and may have originally served as a hamlet for royal hunters (Patel 1986:240). While numerous explanations have been put forward, the origin of the hamlet is mired in legend and shrouded in obscurity. According to the headman, ‘everyone in Jambur is a Sidi’ (Whitehead 2000:2). These Sidis live on the outskirts of the Gir forest and survive by hunting, fishing, wood collecting and unskilled labour work.

According to popular legend, the nawab of Junagadh during his visit to the African continent fell in love with an African woman. She accompanied him back to India with an entourage of 100 slaves and since then, their descendants have continued to reside in Jambur (Sheth 2013). It is possible that the ecology and environment of the Gir forest was similar to that which they had known in Africa and the forests, trees and animals enabled them to meet their basic requirements and to be self-supporting.

In 1902, the nawab of Junagadh who had a large number of Sidi servants, guards, hunters and women in his harem allocated land to some families for permanent settlement in Jambur village. According to recent estimates, the population of Sidis in Jambur is now 4,015 (Roche 2013).

The Sidi population of Jambur known as *Shemali* (perhaps from Somalia) profess to be Muslims and revere saints like Baba Ghor,
Nagarchi Baba, Sidi Makbut, Sidi Pyara, Sidi Mmulu and Mai Parsan (Patel 1986:240). Despite their allegiance to Islam, these Sidis practice certain Hindu customs and have adopted clan names like Parmar, Makwana and Darbar Shah. However, the Sidis of Jambur and Shirwan have, to a greater extent, maintained their separate identity and culture as they do not marry outside the community and those who do so are expelled. They have borrowed and adopted many Hindu social customs and clan names.

The Sidis of Jambur established in 1974 a residential school (Adi-vasi Ashrama Shala). Under the auspices of the Tribal Social Welfare Department, it provides primary and upper primary education to over 200 students.

**Sidis in Mumbai**

According to estimates, there are about 500 Sidis living in Mumbai, many of them in poverty and relative obscurity. As in the past, the Sidis continue to live in the neighbourhood of the Umarkhadi jail, close to Ripon Road in Dongri. In the Muslim suburb of Dongri, there is a place of worship known as ‘Gori Pir Dargah’, which is a holy shrine of the community. There are also a few restaurants and cafes frequented by the Sidis which serve African food and music. However, the majority of these descendants of Africans are forgotten and marginalised and remain on the fringes of Indian society. The records from the late nineteenth century suggest that many of the Sidis participated in loud revels and were addicted to opium. The Sidis, on the other hand often complain that many Indians cannot distinguish between Africans and Sidis and mistakenly think of them as African tourists or students. They are also victims of colour prejudice and racial discrimination. In recent times, there have been a few reported cases of racially motivated attacks on Africans in Mumbai and other Indian cities, where the popular perception is that the Africans are peddlers, cannibals, scoundrels and thieves.

**Sidis of Karnataka**

A significantly large community of African descendants can be found in the southern state of Karnataka, especially in the forested regions of Yellapur and Haliyal in Uttara Kannada district. According to one recent estimate, they number about 40,000 (Frontline, 13 May 2016:77). A majority of them live in poverty and suffer racial and colour discrimination. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 gave them...
modest plots of land, but they mainly survive by collecting and selling forest produce and honey (Ibid.). One area in which they have been able to overcome their low socio-economic status and gain a measure of recognition is athletics. As in Gujarat, an effort was made by the Sports Authority of India in the 1980s to recruit young Sidi men and women and train them for competition in various fields of sports. Those who were selected were sent to special training centres, where they received training, and lived and ate in dormitories. One of these centres was located just outside the forest town of Dandeli in Uttara Kannada. Others were trained in the capital city of Bengaluru. The main goal of this scheme was to utilise the special talents and athletic prowess of the Sidis and prepare them for international competitions. While such schemes were well intentioned, they often failed because of poor implementation or the lack of understanding of Sidi culture. A small number of Sidis who excelled in sports, gained opportunities for meaningful employment but overall, these schemes perpetuated stereotypes about Africans. Moreover, they failed to address the need to provide economic development and upliftment for the larger Sidi community and the sense of alienation that most of them experience in everyday life.

The Sidis of Karnataka like their counterparts in Gujarat have also become involved in self-help organisations, namely ‘The Siddi Women’s Quilting Cooperative’ which promotes and markets the quilts made by the women in Mainali (Drewal 2012: 4).

**Sidis of Hyderabad**

A significant number of Habshis came to Hyderabad during the rule of the nizams who were sovereign rulers of the State from 1724 to 1948. They served as mercenaries, or as domestic slaves in the service of the nizam. According to Haviland, the story goes that in the nineteenth century, the sixth nizam got word of Africans serving in the court of another Indian nobleman and impressed by their qualities, he asked for a batch of Africans to be brought to Hyderabad. A group of several hundred followed. These African guards were known as Risala-i-Hubush and served as bodyguards to the nizams. By 1895, they numbered 305 (Robbins 2006:248). The African soldiers were called chaush, a term borrowed from Ottoman military ranks.

There is a community of Sidis living in Hyderabad today whose ancestors came to India not as slaves primarily, but as guards in the service of the nizams, the Muslim rulers of the princely states. Many of the ancestors of the Sidis in Hyderabad, thus, came as voluntary
immigrants and served in the nizam’s African Cavalry Guards or ‘AC Guards’. According to one Sidi Mir Moazam, the AC Guards occupied an important place in the nizam’s entourage and were ‘the most brilliantly attired, uniformed men; the men did justice to the uniform – they were great big dark-skinned men, and so were their horses!’ (Haviland, ‘Hyderabad’s African Old Guard’ 2003) The old quarter of Masab Tank in Hyderabad was home to the AC Guards. When interviewed by Haviland, these Sidis claimed to have come from British Somaliland and Ethiopia. Some claim South African ancestry but they all seem to have retained little of their African cultural or linguistic heritage with the possible exception of their music (Ibid.). There are cultural retentions such as the use of musical instruments namely ‘daf’ similar to the frame drum. The Habshi musicians in the service of the nizam’s orchestra also played the ‘tambura’ a type of lyre used by the descendants of Africans in the Persian Gulf (Khalidi 1988:14).

After the abolition of slavery, small number of male African slaves continued to enter Hyderabad disguised as women, wives and family members of pilgrims returning from hajj (pilgrimage) in Mecca. This is said to have been a strategy to avoid capture by British officials. The increasing influx of Africans from Arabia and Yemen was perceived as a threat to the stability of the British Empire and consequently, ‘the government of India began to restrict the movement of Africans into Hyderabad’. This move grew out of concern that these Africans were likely to affiliate with Arabs and their culture, thus undermining British authority and culture (Harris 1971: 104).

The Sidis of Hyderabad, unlike their counterparts in Gujarat and elsewhere do not revere Baba Ghor but have assimilated into the mainstream Indian tradition of Sufism. They identify and carry on a tradition that reveres the saint Moinuddin Chishti (1141–1236) of Ajmer (Singh 2003:95). The annual ritual procession honouring this saint serves to unite the audience and those participating and reinforces communal ties. Furthermore, Africans in Hyderabad have constructed an identity based not on their being descended from slaves, but rather as the proud descendants of free soldiers and guards in the princely state of Hyderabad (Ibid. 112).

The future: challenges facing the Sidis

The Sidis face a formidable challenge in the future. This entails lifting themselves out of poverty and gaining recognition as equals in the polyglot, multi-ethnic society of India while at the same time preserving and perpetuating the unique cultural legacy inherited from their
African ancestors. This may prove a daunting task. Several of the more vocal and articulate leaders of the community expressed the view that politicians have little interest in them except to get their votes at election time. Thus, neither the government, nor the elected representatives are advocates for the Sidis.

Another challenge facing the Sidis is that while there are Sidis in Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Goa and Sindh who share certain cultural practices such as African spirit cosmologies, reverence for ancestors and distinct musical traditions and dance, they lack a unified identity. They may recognise their common African ancestry and share a romanticised love of the homeland but have been heavily influenced by the cultures, languages, religions and mores of their local host communities. Thus, a strong sense of an African identity has not emerged. What unites them is their poverty, marginal status, discrimination and ‘outsider status’.

In 1982, the Government of India granted the Sidis of Saurashtra the status of ‘primitive tribes’, making them eligible for financial and other kinds of assistance. Those granted this special status include the Sidis in Junagadh, Amreli, Rajkot, Jamnagar, Bhavnagar and Surendranagar.

Change is coming, though slowly, to this community. There seems to be a growing realisation among the Sidis that education is the way out of their present state of poverty and many of them are committed to providing educational opportunities to their children (Interview with Rumanaben, October 2011). The more enlightened members of the community also strongly adhere to the idea that smaller families will mean greater resources to educate their children. They are putting this into practice with family planning and especially, the education of their daughters.

The people of African descent in South Asia have also been integrating themselves in the global culture through their music and dance. An example of this is a troupe of Sidi musicians from Karachi, Pakistan, which travelled to Washington, D.C. in 1976 to participate and perform at the Festival of American Folklife sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution. Thus, music and dance have become the vehicle by means of which Sidis are gaining recognition outside and are able to preserve and perpetuate their collective cultural memory. In 2004, the Sidi Malunga Project was organised in Zainabad, Gujarat to train sixteen young Sidi youths to learn the use of the Malunga and other Sidi musical instruments so as to enable them to preserve their age-old musical traditions (Nazir and Amy Jairazbhoy 2007:1–3).

Thus, despite having to confront many obstacles, the Sidi community is determined to survive, prosper and gain acceptance in their
adopted homelands. With greater opportunities for education and employment, their aspirations for a better future could become a reality.

The United Nations declared 2015–2025 as the ‘International Decade for people of African Descent’. It is imperative that a new generation of scholars examines and documents the lives and contributions of Africans in South Asia, so they are accorded their rightful place in history.

Notes

1 This reinforces the popular worldwide perception that people of African descent possess unique abilities that make them excel in sports. This is also true in Pakistan, where the members of an African community known as ‘Makranis’ have been promoted as athletes.

2 Literally, the Greater Gujarat Sidi Community Women’s Development Committee.

3 According to a recent estimate, this population of Sidis is higher, about 500. Gujarat Samachar, 30 March 2016.

4 Interestingly enough though, the Sidis unlike the Dalits, have historically not identified their struggles with those of African Americans. The Dalits (untouchables and backward classes) went on to establish the ‘Dalit Panthers’.

5 Similar organisations have been established in Badin, Pakistan such as the Young Sheedi Welfare Organisation (YSWO), which is aimed at promoting the welfare of the Sheedi population and for their economic and social betterment, as well as the All Sindh Sheedi Welfare Association and the All Sindh Al Habash Jama’at.

6 The population of Sidis in Bombay was greater in the nineteenth century. In 1872, they constituted 0.18 per cent of the total population; in 1881 their number was estimated to be 689, in 1891 it was 730 and in 1901 it was 694 (Sadiq Ali 1995:248).
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### Glossary

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<td>Nav</td>
<td>Boat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nawab</td>
<td>Ruler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nizam</td>
<td>Title of the ruler of Hyderabad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyumba</td>
<td>House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paan</td>
<td>Betel leaf which is chewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patelni</td>
<td>Head woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pir</td>
<td>Muslim saint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qibla</td>
<td>The direction to Mecca towards which Muslims turn for prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rao</td>
<td>Title of the rulers of Kutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratha</td>
<td>Chariot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rifa’i sufis</td>
<td>A sect of the Sufis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rig Veda</td>
<td>Ancient Sanskrit text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rojdi</td>
<td>Archaeological site in Gujarat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saidi</td>
<td>Learned or auspicious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saraostus</td>
<td>Saurashtra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savari</td>
<td>Vehicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shia</td>
<td>Sect of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidi</td>
<td>Common term for Africans in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sigerdis</td>
<td>Sagardvipa (Kutch)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sokoni</td>
<td>kitchen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufis</td>
<td>Muslim mystical order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultan</td>
<td>Title of Muslim ruler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>One of the two principal sects of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surias</td>
<td>Concubines in Kiswahili</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ta’wiz</td>
<td>Amulet or locket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanedar</td>
<td>Admiral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urs</td>
<td>Festival to mark the death anniversary of a Sufi saint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valgad</td>
<td>Spirit possession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanias</td>
<td>Merchants, also referred to as baniyas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wazir</td>
<td>Minister</td>
</tr>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xinji</td>
<td>Chinese term for Africans; similar to Zanjis, meaning from Zanzibar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellamma</td>
<td>Goddess worshipped in Southern India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zanjis</td>
<td>From Zanzibar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zenanas</td>
<td>Women’s quarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeze</td>
<td>A type of drum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoroastrians</td>
<td>Parsis, followers of Zoroaster</td>
</tr>
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