

The Asian African Heritage

Identity & History

A Photo exhibition organised by:
The National Museums Of Kenya
The Asian African Heritage Trust



Fort Jesus

The Asian African Heritage: Identity and History was co-organized by the National Museums of Kenya and the Asian African Heritage Trust in year 2000. The exhibition has been supported by the National Museums of Kenya and by voluntary participation and contributions.

The exhibition is founded on the concept (1) of Dr. Sultan H. Somjee, till recently, Head, Division of Ethnography, National Museums of Kenya.

The curator of the exhibition is Dr. Somjee. The photographs have been researched and supervised by Akbar Hussein, and the text of the exhibition and his brochure is by Pheroze Nowrojee.

INTRODUCTION

The presence of peoples from the Indian sub-continent in East Africa goes back well over three thousand years. The presence of peoples from Eastern Africa in India is also of long duration. (2) This exhibition focuses on the Asian African presence in Kenya, and relatedly East Africa, in a more recent period- the last two hundred years.

Many Asian African families have been settled on the Coast, Lamu, Pate, Malindi, Mombasa, Pemba, Zanaibar, Bagamoyo and Dar-es-Salaam from the 1820s and earlier; but the development of our Asian African minority as we know it today emerges from the 1880s.

It was the building of the Uganda Railway (now Kenya Railways), from 1896-1901, and the establishment of the British community in the Kenya. How does our history record them? As Dr. George Abungu, Director-General, National Museums of Kenya, has reminded us, "The Asian Africans were a part of the making of Kenya, and their heritage is representative of this".

Earlier, Dr. Mohamed Isahakia, then Director-General, in initiating the organization of this exhibition stated: "Almost 34 years after Independence our National Museums here has no part of its entire exhibitions focusing on any aspect of Asian history. This must be corrected." (3)

The need for us of know more about each other than we do at present is critical, given the dangers of ethnic-based politics. This knowledge affects how we address those serious issues. It is equally critical for the future, given the fact that Kenya is composed not of one or two different minorities, but of 44 different minorities.

It is therefore important for us as Kenyans to examine all our stories, all our heritages, all our struggles for our freedom, and all our culture, from every part of our country. And thereby, most importantly, ourselves write, record, sculpt, dance, paint, and teach our history, the ideas that move us, and our aspirations.



IDENTITY



My Identities
(Mixed media)
Nabila Alibhai -
1996

After a continuous presence of over 200 years and having fifth generation Africans in almost all families, our Asian African minority is taking stock of itself. Is it African; Indian or South Asian or Kenyan; or all of these? What are its civic, cultural, political and social identities. After this period of two centuries it is clear that the community is now not wholly of the Indian sub-continent. All this has generated interest within the community and among fellow Kenyans. This exhibition examines part of the record. For as Dr. Isahakia put it, "The question of the depth and the breadth of your accomplishments in the social, economic, educational and political developments of the past must play an important role in defining your status in this country". (4)

This process of defining a community must come from the community itself. In respect of the Asian African community Dr. Sultan Somjee says, "**How I define my social identity is my responsibility. For it is also my human right to practice and enjoy my bi-continental tradition. I hold the culture of the Indian Ocean of my Asian ancestors and their African descendants. That makes my family Asian African.**" (5)

Such a process is necessary for every Kenyan community. It is a process of self-definition, and not of being define by colonial or chauvinist apologists or administrators, or merely updating their ideas, pronouncements or stereotypes.

This involves a fresh look at the past. This can only be done by the gathering anew and re-examination of memories, images and the artefacts of daily life. And most of all, by honouring the dignity of the lives led by parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and their forebears.

The Asian African presence is neither sufficiently represented in our history books nor in our schools or universities. Therefore, education and self-examination by the minority as by the nation itself, are overdue.



**Traditions &
Modernity**

THE THREE THEMES OF THE EXHIBITION

THE LABOUR HERITAGE

Labour, not trade, is the foundation of the Asian African heritage in East Africa. The work of the railway builders, masons, wheelwrights, master craftsmen, platelayers, artisans, carpenters, tailors, nurses, dhobis, clerks and teachers was the bedrock on which later endeavours came to be based.

One of the earliest examples of this was the labour of the masons from India who shared in the building of Fort Jesus between 1593 and 1596. They were brought in by the Portuguese from their colonies on India's west coast. (6)

In succeeding centuries and particularly from 1820 onwards, wooden doors, ornamentation and furniture carved and crafted by artists and master carpenters from Gujarat in western India crossed the Indian Ocean to adorn palaces and houses from Pate, Lamu and Mombasa to Kilwa and to Zanzibar, the mercantile capital than of the entire eastern seaboard of Africa. (7)

In addition, their Customs departments and their merchants used the wooden chests fashioned by other Gujarati craftsmen. (8)

From 1896 to 1901, labourers were brought on contract from the Punjab in what are now India and Pakistan, and from Gujarat, by the British to build the railway from Mombasa to Kisumu (then called the Uganda Railway).

In these six years, these labourers and artisans through difficult terrain laid 582 miles (931 kilometres) of railway. They built the Salisbury Bridge, over 1200 feet long, joining Mombasa Island to the mainland, 35 viaducts in the Rift Valley, and 1280 smaller bridges and culverts. All this was done by hand. No machines were available to them in these massive and technical tasks.

31983 workers came from India during these years on these contracts. 2493 died in the construction. That is, 4 workers died for each mile of line laid; more than 38 dying every month during the entire six years. A further 6454 workers became invalid. (9)

Moving camp, Uganda
Railway Construction
Workers (1899)





Gujjar Sutar Community

In May 1898, railhead reached 'Nyrobi', then only a plain of tents. Over the next thirty years Asian African masons, stone dressers, carpenters, artisans, and construction workers built the new town of Nairobi. (10)

They also built the subsequent railway towns of Nakuru and Kisumu, as they had each of the 43 railway stations on the line, such as Mackinnon Road, voi, Mtito Andei, Kijabe, Njoro and Lumbwa.



Vishkarma giver of work and skills

The railway itself was then manned for the next several decades by Asian African drivers, foremen, stationmasters, linesmen, telegraphists, mechanics, gangers, repairmen, upholsterers, carpenters and other workers.

As material was being gathered for this exhibition, a record of the survey for the building of the Nairobi-Mombasa road was also found. These are the drawings and notes of Mohamed Sadiq Cockar, also being exhibited. As a young assistant, he was not only a worker on it, but also marvelled at, and later drew pictures and Gujarati Lohars wheel wrights kept wagons moving long before and after motor vehicles became common.

In addition to the work that kept the arteries of transport flowing, Asian African workers served in the civil service as clerks, accountants, bookkeepers, health workers and particularly, teachers.

It was thus no accident that one of the founders of the trade union movement in our country was Makhan Singh. In 1935, he formed the Labour Trade Union of Kenya, and in 1949, he and Fred Kubai formed the East African Trade Union Congress, the first central organization of trade unions in Kenya.

It is our of this long heritage of labour that our present Asian African community of multiple character has emerged.

THE SOCIAL HERITAGE

The exhibition brings together for the first time hundreds of photographs of Asian African families over the past century, many never seen publicly before. These reflect not the official records of the railway or government administrations but the community's views of itself. Here are private views of the community in clothes, jewellery, prayers, festivals, weddings, betrothals and setting that the community had itself chosen. These are the keepsakes of numerous households, saved over the past hundred years and retrieved by the exhibition from family albums, old trunks, and neglected heaps of files, old service records from government or employers, letters and yellowed newspaper clipping, speaking now for those who have long remained inarticulate. These are records of pride, rejecting humiliation and domination. They portray lives of dignity, resilience and resistance under adverse conditions.

One defence to such conditions was the tenacity of the community in holding on to its cultural practices. Another was the establishment of voluntary organizations that served the basic needs that discrimination and governmental neglect would not provide either adequately or at all. Voluntary welfare organization such as schools, clinics, hospitals and first aid units made provision for indigents. In time, these created an extensive and countrywide civil society sector in Kenya long before the recent growth of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Nor were these social services dependent on funding from outside the community. These institutions were funded by the community itself even when not affluent. Voluntary professional services were given over long periods by doctors, teachers and others.

Many of these services became public, and there are today many such public foundations and programs supporting scholarships, grants to schools and public health.



Sikh Pre-independence Cricket

Team

In the arena of sports the community over many years has been active in the Kenya

Olympic Hockey team, the Kenya National Shooting Squad, the Kenya National Cricket team, and in other sports, including bodybuilding and wrestling. In motor rallying, Joginder Singh (The Flying Sikh) and Shekher Metha, both of Safari Rally fame, are international figures as Sarafino Antao in athletics.

THE INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE



A. M. Jeevanjee



M. A. Desai



Makhan Singh

The Asian African community has been involved in dissent and political activity against oppression for as long as it has been involved in commerce and finance. As the exhibition examines Kenyan history, one finds figures such as A.M. Jeevanjee (of Jeevanjee Grandens renown) and M.A. Desai, who continuously and successfully challenged and controlled settler ambitions for their self-rule in Kenya on the apartheid model of Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. Makhan Singh and Pio Gama Pinto spent years in detention in the struggle for Kenya's freedom. Pio Pinto, over the 35 years since his assassination, remains a major influence and national role model for all Kenyans. Joseph Murumbi was the voice in exile of a silenced Kenya during the Emergency, and later Foreign Minister and our second Vice-President. Amir Jamal is one of the founding fathers of the Tanzanian nation. Fitz De Souza was Deputy speaker of Parliament from 1964-1969, and Chanan Singh was Parliamentary Secretary to President Kenyatta from 1963-1964. But as important was the unheralded support that the community gave to the struggle for independence. Examples of this are people like Mrs. Lila patel and her husband Ambu Patel, who led the movement for the release of Jomo Kenyatta; and Mrs. Desai and J.M. Desai, whose home served as a base of nationalist politics during the same period. Habib Kheshavjee represented many other who were the quiet workers for the independence movement.



Pio Pinto



Joseph Murumbi

In law, advocates such as A.R. Kapila, Fitz de Souza, and Jaswant Singh defended Bildad Kaggia, Jomo Kenyatta, Paul Ngei, Fred Kubai, Achieng Oneko and Kungu Karumba at their trial at Kapenguria (1952-53). They and others such as Chanan Singh defended in hundreds of Mau Mau Causes and appeals. C.B. Madan was a memorable Chief Justice, 1986-88.

In the struggle for the freedom of the Press, Asian African journalists and publishers have played a long and critical part over the whole century. These include Haroun Ahamed, Editor, The Colonial Times, D.K. Sharda, Sitaram Achariar (The Democrat). N.S. Thakur, and four generations of the Vidyarthi family. The Vidyarthis, in publishing since 1935, are still today discharging their professional duties as journalists and publishers in difficult circumstances. Achariar also printed the Gikuyu newspaper Muigwithania, (1928) the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) paper edited by Achieng Oneko. Among others that the Vidyarthis published were Sauti ya Mwafrika, the Kenya African Union (KAU) newspaper, Henry Githigira's Habari za Dunia, Henry Mworira's Musmengerere, and Francis Khamisi's Mwalimu. The printing of all these papers for the forty years between 1920 and 1963 were direct challenges to the colonial government which sought to suppress the African voice against colonialism and for freedom.

Between 1962 and 1972, TRANSITION, edited and published by Rajat Neogy from Kampala, was the leading intellectual magazine from the African continent and reached a global audience.

In the field photojournalism, names such as Mohamed Amin, Mohinder Singh Dhillon, Priya Ramrakha, Sayyid Azim (who won a 1998 Pulitzer) and Jiterdra Arya are internationally known.

While much has been written about the community, Asian African writers have over the decades themselves written much, on a wide range of subjects, both creative and academic. Among them are internationally admired scholars such as Professor Yash Ghai, Professor Dharam Ghai, Professor Mahmood Mamdani, Professor Issa Shivji and Professor Abdul Sherrif; and renowned novelists such as G.V. Desani (All About Hatter, 1948, Penguin Modern Classics 1972) and M.G. Vassanji (The Gunny Sack). The exhibition has published a selected bibliography of such writhing.

Films, entertainment and show business have been contributed to by, among others, Sharad Patel (The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin), Sachin and Avni Dave (supporting UNICEF and numerous other causes) and Freddie Mercury of the pop group Queen (born Farokh Bulsara in Zanzibar).

THE CONTEXT FOR THE FUTURE



Zanzibar postage
stamp, (1991)
painting and
design by John D'
Silva

This exhibition thus provides an essential opportunity to see the context of the Asian African presence in our history. The examination and self-examination needs to continue, defining, changing, reassessing, and redefining, as society itself changes. Much yet remains to be explored, including the commercial heritage of the Asian African community.

The preparation for the exhibition also revealed that there were no places, much less a central place, where access to social records of any of the communities in Kenya were located. This is a purpose wider than the function that the National Archives serves. What is emerging worldwide is that the responsibility and effort for the preservation, protection and display of such records have devolved from the central governments and central museum and archives networks to the respective communities themselves. There is need, therefore, in Kenya to gather documents, photographs and oral histories on a local basis in a systematic manner. Such efforts can then be assisted by the National Archives and the national Museums. We would thus enlarge and preserve our image banks; our resources for a proper remembrances of the past and understanding of the present; and thus our national heritage. This needs to be done before much is irretrievably in time.

END NOTES

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3. Dr. Mohamed Isahakia THE ASIAN AFRICAN MUSEUM PROJECT (Nairobi, 2000).
4. Ibid.
5. Sultan H. Somjee speech made at THE ASIAN AFRICAN HERITAGE TRUST (November, 1998) (Nairobi, The Asian African Heritage Trust,2000).
6. Justus Strandes THE PORTUGUESE PERIOD IN EAST AFRICA (Hamburg, Africa World Press, 1987); Jean F. Wallwork: Nairobi, East African Literature Bureau 1961).
7. Judith Aldrick THE 19th CENTURY CARVED WOODEN DOORS OF THE EAST AFRICAN COAST (Nairobi, Kenya Museum Society, 1999/Azania No.XXV, British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1999); Uwe Rau & Mwalim A. Mwalim DOORS OF ZANZIBAR (Zanzibar, HSP, 1998)
8. J.J. Adie ZANZIBAR CHESTS in A GUIDE TO ZANZIBAR Appendix IV, 104-105 (Nairobi, Government Printer, 1949); Sheila Unwin DHOW TRADE CHESTS Kenya Past and Present (Nairobi, Kenya Museum Society, 1987).
9. Robert Hardy THE IRON SNAKE (London, Collins, 1974), 315. See also Robert Hardy PERMANENT WAY (Nairobi, K.U.R. 1947).
10. Katie Martin (Paintings and Richard Martin (Text) HISTORIC NAIROBI (Nairobi, East African Literature Bureau, 1992).

1. Cynthia Salvadori & Others WE CAME IN DHOWS (Nairobi, Kulgraphics, 1999).
2. Zarina Patel CHALLENGE TO COLONIALISM (Nairobi, 1999).
3. Ambu Patel STRUGGLE TO RELEASE JOMO (Nairobi, 1962).
4. Makhan Singh A HISTORY OF THE TRADE UNIONS IN KENYA (Nairobi, EAPH, 1987).
5. Oginga Odinga & Others PIO PINTO, Kenya's First Political Martyr (New Africa Press, 1966).
6. Rasna Warah TRIPLE HERITAGE (Nairobi, 1999).
7. Cynthia Salvadori THROUGH OPEN DOORS (Nairobi, Kenway, 1983 (Revised Edition, 1989).
8. J.S. Mangat A HISTORY OF THE ASIAN IN KENYA (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987).
9. Dana Seidenberg THE MERCANTILE ADVENTURERS 1750-1985 (New Delhi, New Age Publishers, 1996).
10. Robert Gregory THE QUEST FOR EQUALITY (New Delhi, Vikas, 1983).

