POLITICS OF TRAVELLING IN THE
POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN OCEAN WORLD:
SIDI ABDULA BIN MUBARAK'S
MY JOURNEY TO EAST AFRICA

Helene Basu - Free University Berlin

In 1972, Sidi Abdula bin Mubarak published a small book in Gujarati entitled 'My Journey to East Africa' with an organisation called 'Indian Negro Welfare Board' in Bhavnagar, his hometown. The book tells of a journey to Kenya, Tanzania and Zanzibar in 1971 to which the author and another man, Sulemanbhai Mujavar Rickshawalla, had been invited by Sureshbhai Joshi, a Gujarati Brahman born in Zanzibar. They met in Bhavnagar, the town which Sureshbhai Joshi's grandfather had left in the early twentieth century and where Sidi Abdulabhai lived and served the Maharaja of Bhavnagar as a private secretary. Today, few Sidis remember the journey of these men both of whom died years ago. No one has followed their example by undertaking another journey to Africa and the 'Indian Negro Welfare Board' has since long become defunct. Even less people today know about the existence of the book. Since reading books is generally not an activity many Sidis favour, although more people are literate now than 35 years ago, it is only those few Sidis who have developed a special interest in the history of their kum or jamat (community) who might own a copy. It is usually kept with other written documents locked in a box like a treasure. From such a box I was given a copy of the book by the granddaughter of Sidi Abdula bin Mubarak during my last research in 2004 when I visited her in Bhavnagar.

The core of the book consists of a travel diary written by Sidi Abdulabhai. In addition it contains letters from Kenyan and Tanzanian officials, pieces written by Sureshbhai Joshi and even a part written by the Maharaja of Bhavnagar and his secretary. The last part contains an outline of the aims and objectives of the 'Negro Welfare Board' by its president, Sidi Abdulabhai. These statements and documents reflect the historical and political context in the early 1970s in which the text compilation has to be situated. It demonstrates that Sidi Abdulabhai considered his journey to East Africa less in terms of looking for the Sidi's African heritage than in terms of the contemporary situation of Sidis in Gujarat and the challenges posed by postcolonial modern transformations. Their plight is represented by a critical evaluation by Abdulabhai of Sulemanbhai who was found to misbehave during the journey and accused of misrepresenting orally to fellow Sidis of what happened in East Africa.

46 Dhow culture Dialogues
What kind of experiences had Sidis from Gujarat in East Africa? How are these represented in the text? What was the goal of the journey? Did the journey change their perceptions of being 'African' or 'Gujarati'? How is slavery addressed? These are some of the questions which informed my reading of the book. In this paper, my main interest rests with the sociological realities of which the book is both a product and a vivid description. In order to make Sidi Abdulabhai's travel diary accessible to a wider audience I shall present excerpts of my translations of his text as well as parts of the letters written by the patron of the journey and the Maharaja of Bhavnagar. Treating these texts as a specific kind of ethnographic data, I analyse the story they tell against the findings of my fieldwork research in the Sidi community of Gujarat. The text compilation as a whole reflects the relationship of the author to his own community (jamat), his aspirations to political leadership (which ultimately failed) and, significantly, the role of an East African Gujarati Brahmin in leading Sidi Abdulabhai to aspire to caste leadership in the first place. Taken as a whole, the book is an interesting testimony to postcolonial Indian Ocean realities in the second part of the twentieth century viewed from the perspective of 'Asians' (Gujaratis) in East Africa and Sidis in Western India.

The first part of the paper is concerned with the social position of the author and the beginning of the relationship between the patron of the journey, Sureshbhai Joshi, and Sidis in Bhavnagar. A brief intermediary passage written by Sureshbhai Joshi separates the introductory chapter based in Bhavnagar from the travel diary describing the journey and experiences in Kenya and Tanzania which forms the second part of this paper. In the third part appendix texts written by various authors concerning Sidis, the personality of Sidi Abdulabhai and the objectives of the Negro Welfare Board are presented. The fourth part contains a translation of what Sidi Abdulabhai has to say about the behaviour of his co-traveller in East Africa and a rumour which spread in the Sidi community after their return.
1. The author and the patron: Sidi Abdulla bin Mubarak in the context of Rajput kinship

The author, Sidi Abdula bin Mubarak, had served at the court of Bhavnagar. During the colonial period and until 1948, Bhavnagar was nominally ruled by the Rajput dynasty of Gohil kings. Together with Nawanagar and Kachchh, the state of Bhavnagar was one of the larger Princely States situated in the peninsula of Saurashtra which rose to prominence since the eighteenth century. The rise of these states was closely connected to overseas Indian Ocean trade and the development of harbours on the long coast of Gujarat which attracted a large and mixed population of merchants. Many Gujarati merchant communities in East Africa came originally from one of these Princely States in Saurashtra or Kachchh. Conversely, Bhavnagar and other Rajput states absorbed a small population of Sidis, i.e. people of East African origin. Some of them were sold as slaves until the late nineteenth century to aristocrats and wealthy merchants who employed them as servants, others were seamen turned port labourers who at some point made Gujarat their home. Over time and through marriage, Sidis formed in Gujarat a small Muslim caste known as a jamat (kinship association, caste) or kom (community). In Sidi parlance, jamat or kom refers to people of African origin related by kinship ties but also to the ritual organisation of a Sufi-brotherhood (tariqa) of Sidi fakirs focused upon the saints Bava Gor, Bava Habash and Mai Mishra. The network of Sidi settlements is marked by a host of shrines (dargah) dedicated to their saints. Practices of worshiping Sidi saints include singing, drumming and dancing, and are referred to as damal or goma, the latter being a Swahili word for drum or dance.

After India gained independence Sidi Abdula bin Mubarak held a somewhat privileged position compared to the majority of Sidis living in Gujarat. Most Sidis were poor and struggled to gain a livelihood by performing domestic service and a range of odd jobs, or sometimes even by begging. Sidi Abdula was the son of a famous court servant, Sidi Mubarak, who had served the Maharaja of Bhavnagar, H.H. Krishnakumar Sinhji. In regional poetry composed by Charan bards - royal poets and genealogists who played an important role in the Rajput culture of kingship - Sidi Mubarak is memorized and eulogised as 'Imandar Mubarak' (Honourable Mubarak). Today, audio tapes are sold in the market of Bhavnagar which contain poems sung by popular Charan performers. They speak of his birth to humble Sidi parents serving at the court of the Rajput king of Gondal (a smaller neighbouring Rajput kingdom on the peninsula of Saurashtra). One day, while visiting the king of Gondal, the Maharaja of Bhavnagar saw the boy Mubarak on the street. The Maharaja, the story continues, was struck by the trustworthiness and loyalty radiating from this young 'black man with crooked hair.' He was so attracted to the young Sidi man that he invited him to serve at his court in Bhavnagar. Sidi Mubarak was educated and entrusted with the task of guarding the treasure house where the jewellery of the Maharani (queens) was kept. After his death in the early 1940s, his son, Sidi Abdula bin Mubarak, remained at the court of the Maharaja's nominal successor, Virbadhra Sinhji, until 1973 and served him as a private secretary.

The first page of the book shows a picture which situates the author squarely into Rajput court culture in Bhavnagar. He is dressed in a fine long coat and wears leather
shoes. His turban is tied in the customary style of a senior court employee, in the right hand he holds a dagger, a sword is placed on the left side. Juxtaposed to his own photograph are two pictures showing the sides of his father's tomb in the Muslim graveyard of Bhavnagar. It was endowed by the Maharaja of Bhavnagar in 1942 and is made of marble stones. On one side an inscription in golden letters says 'To my most loyal servant', on the other is painted a lock, symbol of his function at the court and his trustworthiness.

Sureshbhai Joshi meets the Sidis in Bhavnagar: A relation of patronage

In the first chapter the author sets out to tell the 'little story' of 'how we could go to Africa.' He begins his story with praises for 'a great personality, Sureshbhai Joshi' without whom the journey would not have taken place. Shri Sureshbhai Bhanjibhai Joshi was born in Zanzibar where he had worked in the office of the British Resident. At the time of his coming to Bhavnagar, Abdula bin Mubarak informs his readers, he received a pension. In Africa, his forefathers had done 'great services' to the 'Sidi community' (kom) with whom the Joshis had become interconnected in many ways. Because of these old relationships, the author continues, there are now Sidis in Bhavnagar and Sureshbhai Joshi had come to 'contact us here.' (p. 2)

Sureshbhai Joshi sought out the Sidi dargah in Bhavnagar, referred to by the author as 'Sidi takiya' ('seat of fakirs'). He had brought a gift with him, a wooden plate with letters in Arabic saying 'Allah is one.' During the weeks that Sureshbhai Joshi stayed in Bhavnagar, 'he developed great love (mohbat) for our jamat' (3). And, importantly, he attended an 'urs celebration at the Sidi dargah together with the family of Sidi Abdulabhai. He witnessed Sidi ritual performances and 'liked goma very much.' (ibid.)

In the course of time, Sureshbhai Joshi urged the Sidis in Bhavnagar to hold regular meetings at the shrine. Sidi Abdulabhai who, because of his position at the royal court, had not gone often to the shrine, now accompanied Sureshbhai and supported his suggestion to make Sidis aware of modern times and of the need to educate their children. At the meetings, Sureshbhai told them about African independence and the necessity to
develop and progress. Finally, 'under the authority of Sureshbhai', an organisation called the Indian Negro Welfare Board' was founded (ibid.). Sidi Abdula became its president. During the meetings, the author points out, Sureshbhai Joshi often talked about the mul vatan (original place) of Sidis in Africa, which 'made us think of how nice it would be to see our mul vatan in East Africa.' (3) This became possible thanks to the 'unlimited generosity of Sureshbhai Saheb' as he offered to take a 'delegation of the Indian Negro Welfare Board' to East Africa.

The delegation consisted of two Sidi men, the author and Sidi Sulemanbhai Mujavar Rickshawalla. Sulemanbhai lived in Jamnagar where he took care of the shrine (as his name indicates, mujavar) and earned his living by pulling a rickshaw. Originally, Abdulabhai explains, another man had been selected to join the party going to East Africa. But he fell sick and they (Sureshbhai and Abdulabhai) decided 'to take Sulemanbhai who was a son of Bhavnagar but now lived in Jamnagar.' When Sulemanbhai came to know that Sureshbhai had agreed to invite him to the journey, he 'lost his mind in happiness and told me: "Sureshbhai has so much love for poor people like me. If not, how would I ever have been able to see Africa? Even if I would give my skin for making his shoes I could not return this favour bestowed upon me!"' (3).

The idea behind the journey was not only that Sidis should see their 'original homeland' (mul vatan) but also 'to show the Sidi brothers there that we Sidis here can do goma with drums just like them. We wanted to show them that we had kept our culture (sanskriti).' (5) Sulemanbhai had been invited for doing goma, since, as the author explains: 'I could not do goma because of my position at the court. Sulemanbhai was to show goma and that was one important reason for taking him to the journey.' (p. 5)

In addition, 'we wanted to see our Sidi's mul vatan (original place) in East Africa, we wanted to learn about the lives of our Sidi brothers and sisters there and refresh our relationships with them. We also wanted to study African independence and progress.' (4)

The author dwells at length at organisational and financial aspects of the journey - the cost for railway and steamer tickets, for suitcases, new cloths and shoes all of which was provided for by the patron of the journey, Sureshbhai Joshi. In Africa, Abdula bin Mubarak points out, all expenses for travel, food and lodging were borne by family members and friends of Sureshbhai Joshi: 'there was no need for us to worry about a single expense.' Altogether, the author estimates that the costs of the journey came to Rs. 25,000 (an enormous amount of money then). And Abdulabhai writes: 'I have no words to express my gratitude for the loving generosity Sureshbhai, his family and friends showed us. I am praying to God for their ever-lasting well-being.' (5)

The Sidi's journey to East Africa was received as a big event which even appeared in the local press: 'News about our going to Africa appeared in the "Saurashtra News" and various other newspapers. From Surendranagar, Jamnagar, Gondal, Rajkot, Junagadh, Jambur, Talala and other [Sidi] places we received well-wishings.' (5)

**Interlude: Sureshbhai Joshi**

In a brief section (be bol = two words') Sureshbhai Joshi introduces himself and explains how, when he came to Bhavnagar, he met Sidi Abdula bin Mubarak who ,I
believe is a saint. The Sidis who came to this country, he continues, received a little more compassion than those who had been sold to America. As has been described in Uncle Tom's Cabin, they lived in hell and their suffering has not yet fully received justice. In this country, the kings who settled Sidis in their kingdom maintained them according to their own free system of ruling the people. They appointed them to do service. These are big historical questions which we have not completely understood. He goes on to explain that after having met the Sidi community (kom) he felt like doing whatever he could to make them progress. He had invited the author and his kinsman to the journey so that the Sidis here would receive true knowledge about Sidis in East Africa which would be useful for them. They know the high culture of India. During this journey they were received with great love by the governments of Kenya and Tanzania who did whatever they could to make them feel welcome. I feel grateful and very much obliged to them. Sureshbbhai Joshi ends this part with the words 'I feel peace that God helped me to perform this truthful action."

This brief introductory statement gives Sureshbbhai, the patron, the face of an exemplary moral person and the voice of an educationist. The journey to East Africa should result in enhancing the Sidi's awareness of African progress and thereby motivate them to join in India's progress. At the same time, the journey should make them realise once again India's superior culture which becomes manifest in the treatment of slaves. Unlike in America, African slaves were not exploited on plantations but found privileged employment at the courts of Indian kings. Moreover, by idealising Sidi Abdulabhai as a saint Sureshbbhai's sponsoring his journey to East Africa is transformed into a morally meritorious act.

2. The Travel Diary: The Journey

When Gujaratis go on a journey, they first 'take leave' from local or personal gods, goddesses or saints. Sidis do the same. This practice informs the structure of the book as well as its narrative. Thus, the travel diary is preceded by a section on religious statements. It contains reflections on the multifaceted nature of God, the journey of life, the importance of saints leading exemplary lives as well as prayers. Then the author lists 'religious places of Sidis' where 'Bava Gor dada' and other Sidi saints are buried in shrines (dargah). Before they left India, Sidi Abdulabbin Mubarak and Sulemanbhai went to the dargah of Bava Gor in Bombay. They offered flowers and coconuts, bid the saints farewell and asked for their protection during the journey.

In the 1970s the bulk of traffic between East Africa, Oman and India had not yet been taken over by airplanes. The group travelled by steamer from Bombay to Mombasa. The description of the sea journey makes it plain how far removed Sidi Abdulabhai and Sidi Sulemanbhai were from the Sidis' past as sailors and seamen. Having set foot on a ship for the first time, Abdulabhai's observations of the sea, rain and storms and sea-sickness fill many a page. What interested the author most, however, were the many different people they encountered during the trip - all kinds of Sidis and Indians who are identified by region, caste or religious community. 'Sidi' is used throughout the book to refer to people with an African phenotype. Whether port labour-
ers encountered in Karachi or street populations encountered in Mahe, Mombasa, Nairobi and elsewhere during the journey to East Africa, they are always described as 'Sidis.' Sometimes qualifications are added, such as 'the Sidis of this place', 'African Sidis' or 'American Sidis'.

During the journey they met all kinds of Sidis. Already in Bombay, at the shrine of Bava Gor they met an unhappy Sidi whose father was a 'Suni Patel' (Bohra) from Gujarat who had married an 'African Sidi woman' in Zambia, where the young man had grown up and spent most of his life. Then the father had brought him to India and left him there to look after his business, while he himself returned to Zambia. The man told Sidi Abudlabhai and Sidi Sulemanbhai that he longed to go home to Africa, but was not allowed to do so. (2, p. 2)

After the steamer left the harbour of Bombay, the first halt was in Karachi where they were recognised as kinsmen by Sidi dockers unloading the ship. Sidi Abdulabhai describes the encounter: 'One labourer asked: You are Sidis from which village? When we told him he went back to the Sidi quarter and told everybody. Then the eldest son Subhan, his wife Aisha, their sons Iqbal and Anwar, several daughters and all the relatives and many others of our Sidis came, all who had come to know about our arrival. They entered the steamer to meet with us and brought gifts for us. [...] They sat for a while and then we happily parted.' (2, p. 5) On board, Abdulabhai writes about meeting seamen such as two men from Kachch, Ilyasbhai and a Khoja Bhai, who explained to him what kind of work has to be done on a steamer. (2, 7f.).

After several days at sea, the ship reached the island of Mahe in the Seychelles. Joshi Sahib took them to see the harbour town and the author observed: 'There were no cows, water-buffaloes or goats to be seen on the streets, no horse driven carts either. Only cars, cars and cars. Cars of many different types...' (2, p. 9). Again they met with dockers unloading cargo from the steamer who 'were all Sidi brothers. When they saw us they were surprised and happy.' (2, p. 10)

After two more days they arrived in Mombasa on 1 July. Kenya was home to Sureshbhai Joshi's maternal and affinal relatives. In the harbour, they were received by his mama (mother's brother) Shantikant Pragibhai Joshi, who took the travellers in his car to his house in a village outside Mombasa. Abdulabhai writes of their first day: 'In the morning we met with his daughter Kirtiben and his wife Manjulaben.' Manjulaben is praised for making the most delicious food - all familiar Gujarati dishes. Once she offered to make an 'African dish' (apparently ugali, referred to by the author as 'maize pulao'), of which the two Sidi travellers were sceptical at first, but it turned out to be tasty. With Manjulaben and other women, the author writes 'we [went] to the market which they call in the language of the land 'shoko'. We looked at the shops and provision stores and walked around. In the afternoon we slept and drank tea. Then we went to look at the Hotel Leisure which is 25 miles away. 'This hotel lies on the shore of the sea and belongs to a German Company. It was built for five lakhs [500,000]. All the rooms have telephone, television and airconditioners. It is very nice. The waves were very high and I liked the sea very much. Strongly-built (rusht-pusht) Sidi brothers and sisters were walking around and looked at the fish which fishermen had brought in.' (2,

52 Dhow culture Dialogues
The next day they went with Shantikant in his car to Mombasa. 'First we went to the post office. It is a beautiful building. In each of the fifteen or twenty cabins was sitting a Sidi clerk.' Then they went to meet the 'Coast Regional Commissioner' in his office, the first of many more official meetings to come. Joshi Saheb, being widely connected to politically influential and wealthy Gujaratis and Indians in East Africa, introduced Sidi Abdulabhai and Sulemanbhai as the 'Delegation of the Indian Negro Welfare Board' from Gujarat to state officials. They carried an album containing photographs of Sidi goma performances in Gujarat, which they showed to their hosts. Of the meeting with the Coast Regional Commissioner Abdulabhai writes: 'We told him all about ourselves. Then Ngala Saheb told us about the problems to make his country progress. He said: 'You have come from so far away to learn about this. I am very happy that I could meet you.' He allowed Joshi Saheb to take photographs.' (14) During this and other meetings with Kenyan and Tanzanian officials, the author points out, 'lots of photographs were taken, which later appeared in newspapers. In and around Mombasa, the two Sidis were taken around by friends and relatives of the Joshis. They were shown various kinds of factories (e.g. sugar, furniture) and shops run by Brahmins, Khojas and others from Gujarat or by Sikhs from Punjab. At a sugar factory they met with the manager Shri Khimjibhai Gokaldas Raja. For the first time, the topic of slavery is brought up. 'He talked very nicely with us for a long time. He told us how many years ago the children of Sidis were captured by Arab people and then kept in a cage near the sea. He suggested we should go and see the cage. ... In the afternoon he picked us up in his car and we drove twenty miles to the village "Shimoni" near the sea. The Sidi there were fishermen and sold fish. From this village boys and girls were caught. They were brought to the cage and from there sent to the ships which brought them to other shores. We saw the cage. There was a well in the village where we met the young Sidi wife of a custom officer. She liked us and showed us everything.' Sidi Abdulabhai, however, does not comment on this information.

On the same day, late at night, a Sardarji [a Sikh] whom they had met at the sugar factory came to invite them to his wood factory where he and his friends were to gather for a religious singing session. The village turned out to lie in a forest area and Sidi Abdulabhai is surprised that African Sidis are living in such wilderness: 'After we had our dinner, officer Sardarji Hajrasinhji came with his car and took us to a small village about 15 miles away. The name of the village was Shumbha Mungu. Here they made wooden furniture. We were given nice chairs to sit and drank tea. Then we listened to bhajan-kirtan until four o'clock at night.' And he continued: 'That place was on a river right in the middle of the jungle. At night this was a most sinister place to be at. There were lions, deer, zebra, snakes, elephants and all sorts of wild animals. The Sidi working there stayed all alone, only with the elephants and other wild animals, in that sinister place.' (2, p. 17)

In the evenings, Sulemanbhai's goma programmes were held in schools and factories attended by African and Indian school children, 'Sidi brothers and sisters and other people Gujaratis/Indians.' (2, p. 15) Sometimes Abdulabhai notes that it was received
well, more often, however he writes that people 'did not find it very special.'

After about a week, the group left for Nairobi, where they were received by Joshibhai's sala (wife's brother) and sasra (wife's father) Shri Himatlatl Jani Saheb. Abdulabhai learns that he is originally from Gondal, a town not far from Bhavnagar, and principal at the Oswal Secondary School. Oswal is the name of Jain Banias known in Gujarat for their exclusivist social institutions. The author is impressed that 'the school and boarding which is maintained by the Oswal jati (caste) also admits [African] Sidi children. They do not keep any bhedbhav [caste discrimination].' (2, 27)

Abdulabhai is impressed by the modern city of Nairobi and carefully observes daily life, comparing it to his familiar world in Bhavnagar. His hosts stayed at the outskirts of the city and Abdulabhai writes: 'The houses are often thirty miles away from Nairobi. Just as we have Krishnanagar, Sardarnagar or Vidhyanagar [new housing colonies in Bhavnagar] there are Parklands 1, 2, 3 here. The bungalow of Jani Saheb, where we are staying, is in Parkland 2. Day and night one hears and sees aeroplanes in the sky.' (2, 27) And he continues: 'In the town one can recognise men and women from Gujarat and Saurashtra by their dress. We have also seen many Sidis and Sidi sisters [Africans]. They are strong and look happy. The men wear different suits and the women wear different dresses. It is also said that they keep cars which cost three lakhs [300,000] and more. Cars are with anybody here.'

With JoshiSaheb, Abdulabhai and Sulemanbhai went to town by bus. Sometimes the author records talking to strangers: 'We went out today and waited at the bus stand. There we met a Sidi brother. He was an officer of the bus department. Joshi Saheb introduced us and said that we had come to see our original place (mul vatan). When we talked to him the man was extremely happy. He asked us 'how is your situation in India? Do you get food there or not? If you have any problem, you should come to Nairobi. There is always a door open for you.' We said no, we have no problems. Talking like this, the bus was coming.' (2, 26)

In and around Nairobi, the Indian Negro Welfare Board Delegation was taken to visit more factories and business ventures owned by Gujaratis or other Indians, and African politicians and media persons. At all these meetings Joshi Saheb was present, mediating the encounters and interpreting between English, Swahili and Gujarati. Sidi Abdulabhai and Sidi Sulemanbhai had numerous appointments with media people, who wrote articles about the delegation of 'Indian Negroes' and printed their photographs, all meticulously recorded by the author. Sometimes, interviewers seem to have expected narratives of discrimination. Such expectations, however, were not fulfilled by Sidi Abdulabhai, son of the 'most loyal servant' of the king of Bhavnagar. For example, Abdulabhai writes of a meeting on 15 July with a Kenyan reporter from the Sunday Post: 'He wanted to know a whole lot and asked deep questions. [...] He wanted to know about the situation of negroes in Gujarat, how the government is treating them. We told them that the Indian government and the Gujarat government are very helpful. That as far as we are concerned we do not face any problems. On the contrary, the government is trying very hard to create salaried employment (nokari). Hearing this and that the government is looking after us well made them very happy.' (2, 28)
The most important meetings were arranged in the office of the Kenyan President, where they met the Secretary of the Foreign Section, 'very much according to protocol,' as Sidi Abdulabhai, well versed in royal protocols, states with satisfaction. (2, 24-25) On 21 July, Abdulabhai writes: 'At three o'clock in the afternoon we met with the Minister of State. He kindly talked with us for one hour. He said: 'I have been to Cochin and Travancore and have seen Sidi there [he probably meant 'Untouchables']. They were in a very poor state. I was terribly sorry for them. These Harijan people presented me with beautiful cloths. I welcomed them by giving them my hand. These people were very oppressed, I did not like that at all'. As if to make up for India's deficiencies, he continues: 'But he did like our album which we gave him as a present. [...] He said "I shall always keep a place for you at my table." At the time of leaving he said: "Because of your coming here our relationships with India have now become as stable as made of cement (2, 35). Thus, instead of looking for their African roots, the Sidi travellers assumed the role accorded to them by their hosts, almost acting like 'diplomats' who represented past translocal relationships between India and East Africa in the Indian Ocean world that, in the new postcolonial setting, were being transformed into relationships between nation states.

From Nairobi they travelled to Morogoro and then further to Dar es Salaam. They went in the car of Shri Jayanthibhai, a relative of Joshsaheb. In Dar es Salaam, Joshsaheb's elder brother was living. After the Zanzibar revolution in 1964, he and his family had moved to the Tanzanian mainland, as many Indians did at the time (and before many of them migrated further to Britain). In Dar es Salaam, the two Sidis were accommodated in a Muslim guesthouse run by a 'Kokani man' called Husseinbhai. Sidi Abdulabhai is pleased that it was close to the mosque.

Again, the delegation of the 'Indian Negro Welfare Board' met African leaders and businessmen from Saurashtra or elsewhere in India. Of a visit to the Indian High Commissioner, Sidi Abdulabhai writes: 'Today we went to the office of the Hindi High Commissioner to see the mayor sahib. There we met an American Sidi who sang "Hare Ram, Hare Krishna." We took photographs with them in front of the office.' (2, 37) And again, their visit was made public in the media, as Abdulabhai notes: 'In the evening our picture was shown on "telenews".'

The highlight in Tanzania was a trip to Zanzibar by air and a stay in an 'air-conditioned hotel', which was sponsored by the Zanzibar government: 'Today we four, Joshsaheb, Satishbhai, Sulemanbhai and I went on government expense in a plane to Zanzibar. We arrived at ten o'clock in the morning. We were received by officers with great sympathy and according to protocol. A government car had come to pick us up. Then we met the President About Jumbe Saheb. There were ten or twelve people with him. We talked a lot and parted with love.' (43) They also visited the tomb of Karume, the first President of Zanzibar. In accordance with Gujarati Muslim notions of paying respect to the dead, Sidi Abdulabhai records that they read the first chapter of the Quran (fatiha) at Karume's tomb.

Later, they were shown clove and orange plantations and state-financed housing projects for the poor: 'We saw very small villages. Here in Zanzibar poor people get rooms
in good houses and they get three acres of land free. They work hard but do not need to pay rent.' Afterwards, as Abdulabhai happily records, they had dinner at the house of a man whose family was from Jamnagar.

After their return from Zanzibar to Dar es Salaam, the group travelled back to Mombasa through the interior of Tanzania and Kenya, visiting coffee and sisal plantations. At the end of September, Sidi Abdulabhai and Sidi Suleman boarded the steamer in Mombasa going back to Bombay. This time Joshi Saheb did not go with them, but his mother-in-law travelled in the same ship in order to visit her family in Saurashtra. On 6 October, Friday 'we arrived from Mumbai by Mail Express at four o'clock in the morning in Bhavnagar.' (2, 50)

The chapter ends with a list of all the names and places of the people they had met in Kenya and Tanzania. Two symbols of the sun which are often found on Rajput memorial stones separates this section from the second part of the book which contains a collection of a different kind of written statements.

3. Appendixes: Sidis, Patrons and the Negro Welfare Board

The first statement is entitled, Bharatna amari agam '- 'Our coming to India.' This part summarises what Sidi Abdulabhai had learnt of the Sidi's past as slaves during the journey. He writes: 'During the last 300 years many of our Sidis had performed the work of slaves (gulam) and were sold to India by merchants. They were captured from the streets of East Africa. The gloomy history of this inhuman displacement from their land is known. Until today some of our Sidi brothers can be identified [by their names] from places in East Africa, such as Basa' (from Mombasa) and 'Angujia' (Unguja, the larger island in Zanzibar.). Some of the East African Sidi's customs and words, such as jambo, ogari, mama, baba, karibu, goma, are used here until today. The goma drums and the rattles of Mai Mishra we use in our programmes give us knowledge about our origin, just as from seeing our complexion, hair and body we know that we have come from East Africa. I am deeply grateful to Allah that after so many years we were able to refresh our relationships with East Africa where we had so many good experiences.' (2, 52-53).
The headline of the next section says 'We say Thanks.' Here, the author draws attention to the situation of the Sidi in the new Gujarat which had been turned into an Indian state in 1961. Sidi Abdulahbhai appreciates that the Indian government has counted the Sidi kom as a 'backward Adivasi' category ('Scheduled Tribe') whose members are entitled to privileged consideration for school admission, government posts and interest-free loans. Several government officers who supported the Sidi demand for being included in affirmative action programmes are mentioned by name and thanked for helping the Sidi to progress.

This section is followed by letters from Indian, Kenyan and Tanzanian officials connected with the journey of the delegation of the 'Negro Welfare Board' to East Africa. These are introduced by the author with the words: 'The two countries of Kenya and Tanzania have given us a lot of love. So many people have written letters on behalf of the Indian Negro Welfare Board which I deeply appreciate.'

'My loving follower' (mara snehi) is a text signed by Krishnakumar Sinhji, Maharaja of Bhavnagar. The Maharaja summarises the history of his servants Sidi Mubarak and his son Abdulabhai at the court. After explaining the responsibility of his Sidi servants which was to look after the treasure house and the state finances, he states: 'Abdulabhai was my most trusted servant. He understood my ways and was highly experienced in his work. Sidis are special and he is the most special person whom I have never distrusted a single day in my life.' (11) The section also contains a certificate in English, dated 16 May, 1973 and signed by the 'Private Secretary of H.H. the Maharaja Saheb of Bhavnagar' which says:

This is to certify that Shri Abdulabhai M. Sidi retired from His Highness the Maharaja Saheb of Bhavnagar's Private Service after serving His Highness most faithfully for over 50 years. I can say, without hesitation or exaggeration, that during his tenure of service, he was always found to be a person of highest integrity and exemplary honesty. [...] I wish him every success. (14)

The next section contains another passage written by Sureshbhai Joshi about Sidi Abdulabhai and his family in the former kingdom of Bhavnagar. After introducing the names of his sons and daughters and the various places where they lived in Gujarat (out-
side Bhavnagar) he writes: 'They all live in their own places. Wherever they flower they have a superb reputation. His younger daughter Nashimbanu has come number two in the B.A. examination. Since the Sidi kom has arrived in India and until today no girl has gone up to B.A. [...]'. (16) He then continues: 'It is because of the actions of the Maharaja of Bhavnagar that in the whole Sidi kom of Saurashtra a cultured and honourable family could come forward. In my view the family of Sidi Mubarak is the only one and I therefore feel extremely happy to include their details in this entry. Abdulabhai is now the president of the Negro Welfare Board in Bhavnagar and he does very good work on behalf of the organisation. He is also the president of the Sidi jamat to promote their education and heads the family trust of Sidi Mubarak."

The following paragraph is again written by Sidi Abdulabhai and is addressed to the Sidis: 'For the special use of the Sidi caste (nyatt). Here, he explains that the Gujarati government supports Advasis (who have come from the forests) and other 'backward castes' such as the 'Sidi caste' (jati). He writes 'Those who are low are given education free, they do not need to give examinations and get free boarding in school hostels.' In this way, Sidi Abdulabhai spells out how and in which domains Sidis can profit from state support.

The final section explains the aims and objectives of the 'Negro Welfare Board' by its president, Sidi Abdulabhai: 'This organisation can be joined by all those who are known in India by the name Habshi (Sidi). People who are born in Africa or hold an African passport may also join. No matter what religion, this institution is for all those who have come from Africa, all those who are of the kind of Habshis (Sidi), whatever their profession or work. But they should be of the kind (jati) [body] of Sidis.' The organisation does not demand regular fees but collects voluntary donations which will be used for the general upliftment of Sidis and their education. It also aims at organising mutual visits by Sidis from East Africa to India and vice versa: 'It is our task to develop and expand the relationships between India and Africa, especially East Africa, from where our elders have come.' (10)

The book is concluded with a picture of a warrior on a horse painted in the style of Rajput miniature paintings. Written above is the warrior's name: Sidi Javer. An explanation of the picture is given below by Abdulabhai: 'In the palace of Sihor [in Rajasthan], the original capital of the Bhavnagar kingdom, can be seen a painting of Javer, a Sidi soldier. Maharaja Vakatsinhji of Bhavnagar [early 18th century] had taken his servant Sidi Javer to war against his [the Maharaja's] elder brother at a place near Sihor.'

4. Sulemanbhai Disruptions

Having arrived at the end of the book, I shall now come back to a section of the first chapter in which Sidi Abdulabhai talks of problems that were caused by 'indisciplined behaviour' of his Sidi co-traveller Sulemanbhai during the journey. After their return, Sulemanbhai in telling his version of what happened in East Africa apparently caused a series of rumours amongst Sidis all over Saurashtra which the author wants to set right.

In his introductory chapter, Sidi Abdulabhai complains that the journey to East Africa, so full of joy, had been disrupted by a 'painful event' caused by Sulemanbhai.
The author sadly notes that 'this event caused a lot of distress during the journey. And after our return, a lot of wrong talk occurred in our Sidi jamat. I therefore cannot keep quiet about this.' (1, 5) He writes:

'After we had arrived in Africa, for a few days everything went well. But gradually Bhai Suleman lost all discipline (shist). At the end, this caused a lot of embarrassment in the family and among the shopkeepers (vepari) [in East Africa]. Many similar happenings led to one event which young and old finally made to feel they had enough.

Bhai Suleman's programme had been fixed at one place. Bhai Suleman had agreed to Ms. Umaben's [one of their hosts] suggestion to invite other musicians as well. She had specially invited some professional singers one of whom was a music teacher and singing instructor of the ladies there. Other people had printed tickets for this programme which was to become a big event. Many people were expected to come.

Sureshbhai had brought three or four drums (dhol) [on which Sulemanbhai was supposed to play]. But Sulemanbhai did not like them. Sureshbhai took the drum himself and said, 'I can play them and you, a Sidi, cannot?' Sulemanbhai replied that he would not play today but keep everything ready for tomorrow. He said 'I will show my work' [i.e. goma]. But he did not keep anything ready and he did not show his work at all. At our programme which so many people had helped to prepare he fell sick. When people brought him hot and cold water, Sulemanbhai said 'I have a toothache, don't bring anything.'

A man working in a printing press and a friend of Joshi Saheb offered to take him to a very capable dentist in Mombasa in his car and even to pay for his treatment. But Sulemanbhai stubbornly replied: 'My special doctor is in Jamnagar. I don't go to anybody else and do not let anybody else pull out my tooth.'

The situation got even worse: 'Because of his toothache', the author writes, 'Sulemanbhai stayed back in the house. But two or three days later he got angry and shouted in the presence of Joshi Saheb's sassra (wife's father) and the whole family: 'While leaving me all alone you happily went out together!' When he shouted like this some people got so angry that I cannot remember what they said. And Sulemanbhai continued to become angry in this way.

There are other bad things to be told [such as the following]. Any shopkeeper we had been to [with members of Joshi Saheb's family] Sulemanbhai later went back to alone and asked 'What price did these people give you for the fruit?' Surely we had not gone to beg for fruit from anybody, therefore people got very angry about this kind of inquiries.

Because his snooping around caused so many quarrels in our caste (nyati) I have to give more explanations. What an unrestrained and shameful action,' writes Abdulabhai, 'to inquire about the person who had paid for our journey from his own pocket, whose whole family had lovingly welcomed us as their guests in their houses, to look at those people with doubt in the eye! This should be obvious to everyone.

From such kind of behaviour of Sulemanbhai my heart broke. Although my heart had told me to take another person to the journey, still we had settled to travel with him.

At the time of leaving I had no place in my bag. Sulemanbhai said: 'Give the things to me, there is place in my bag. I shall give it to you when we reach Bhavnagar. He put
three of my pipes and tobacco into his bag, and a beautiful wooden box of the price of Rs. 250. But when we had reached Bhavnagar he returned none of my things to me. Neither did he return Joshisaheb’s trunk which he had given him for the journey. Look at this! Not only this, but when we came home he gave the brothers and sisters of our Sidi kom many kinds of wrong information. I therefore need to explain more.

One day we had talked with an honest shopkeeper in Africa about how to establish a boarding house for Sidi students. We talked whether Jamnagar or Bhavnagar would be a better place to open such a boarding house. The friendly shopkeeper said to me: 'If you want to open a boarding house in Bhavnagar, I can sell you a plot there. Me and my brother Haji Umbarbai are the owners. For this purpose we could give you the plot for around fifty Thousand Rupees.' About this matter we talked with another honest shopkeeper. He had another idea and said: 'If you would take ten tons of cloves from here and if you get an export permit, we will sell you the cloves for a small price, about sixty Thousand Rupees. If you take the cloves to India and sell them there you can make about ten lakhs of Rupees. In this way you will be able to do your work.' I told him that now the time is not good. If it is God’s wish we will come back to the offer. (9)

In Africa we had just thought about this but when we came back here [to Bhavnagar] there was talk everywhere that the African government had sent thirty lakh Rupees and ten tons of cloves and that every Sidi family should be given one Thousand Rupees and one kilo of cloves. But both the money and the cloves had been kept by Sureshbhai Joshi and Abdulabhai!

Our Sidi kom may be illiterate and backward, but that does not mean that everybody should not be able to decide for himself if such talk is true or false. [...] By turning his indebtedness into ungratefulness and by misrepresenting our talks in Africa, Sulemanbhai has shamed the whole Sidi kom. Sureshbhai Joshi helped us establish the Negro Welfare Board, he made the journey possible from his body, mind, and wealth, the plate saying "Allah is one" is hanging in our shrine - and we do not believe his word and have no thanks for him? (10)

**Afterthoughts**

Taken as a whole, the book demonstrates that the invitation of Sidi Abdulabhai and Sidi Sulemanbhai by Sureshbhai Joshi from Tanzania was charged with political motives. Merchants from Gujarat were important economic and financial players in colonial Zanzibar, Tanzania and Kenya, visible in terms of wealth, political influence and marked as culturally distinct by language, dress and social behaviour. The difficulties Indians (or 'Asians') faced at the time in the young postcolonial states of Tanzania and Kenya where their social and economic positions were questioned in new and often hostile ways was probably a major force behind sponsoring a journey of Sidis to East Africa. But it could not be any Sidi most of whom were poor and uneducated. Significantly, Sureshbhai Joshi sought out Sidi Abdulabhai who, because of his position at the court of Bhavnagar, held an elite position within his jamat. In a way, Sureshbhai Joshi educated Sidi Abdulabhai about modern values, the political changes in Africa and relationships between nation states, and thereby turned him into a political leader of Sidis in Gujarat. In this role, i.e.

60  Dhow culture Dialogues
as the president of the Indian Negro Welfare Board, he then travelled to East Africa. Thus, the visit to the African mul vatan (original place) of Sidis became charged with a very different mission. In Kenya and Tanzania, the Sidi travellers were promoted by their hosts as a kind of unofficial envoy of Africans in India who seemed to mirror the presence of Indians in Africa. The subtext of their mission read: 'Look, Africans face no problems in India, why should Indians face problems in Africa?'

While political motives framed the journey, there are other important aspects to it as well. Sidi Abdulabhai's travel diary makes plain that the Sidi's journey to East Africa was very much a journey to upper-class 'Gujarati East Africa.' Their hosts were well connected to the powerful and the educated from the African upper classes. Contacts with ordinary Africans, workers and poor people, like the majority of Sidis in Gujarat, were rather limited. Sidi Abdulabhai's observations of Africa and 'African Sidis' are therefore marked by ambiguities. On the one hand, in Kenya and Tanzania he experienced an encounter with modernity, which he was exposed to much less in India at the time. The number and variety of cars he saw on the streets are a recurring theme. He went to the cinema for the first time in Nairobi and had easy access to watching television wherever they went. Often he and Sulemanbhai watched 'African Sidi dances' at night on television, finding them very different from 'Sidi dances in Hindustan.' (2, p. 37) Sometimes, Sidi Abdulabhai comes close to typically Indian stereotypes of 'Africa' that associate 'wilderness' (jungli), the presence of dangerous animals and 'strong African bodies.' The journey made him more aware of being 'Gujarati' (or Indian). This feeling was apparently strengthened by, on the one hand, coming into contact with strange food, unintelligible languages and sinister places, and on the other, by being securely located in a social environment which provided familiar food, where the language spoken was Gujarati and where people lived in houses not very different from those built at home in Bhavnagar.

Back in Bhavnagar, the journey to East Africa had made Sidi Abdulabhai a recognised leader of his caste - but not a leader who had the support of his fellow caste members. Rather, he was made a leader from above, as the letters from the Maharaja and Sureshbbhai Joshi praising Sidi Abdul's character, loyalty and integrity demonstrate. Conversely, the tone of the book suggests that it has been intended as a gift by the author: a gift to the patron of the journey and his hosts in East Africa, a gift to the Indian Government in return for favours and grants (Scheduled Tribes status). While the author expresses his gratitude towards his superiors, he gives advice to his caste and criticises gossip and the behaviour of his co-traveller Sulemanbhai.

Obviously, Sulemanbhai perceived things differently. First of all, he was the only Sidi performer and he might have soon had enough of just showing how one does goma - alone and on stage, which is an odd idea to most Sidis in Gujarat. His sudden refusal to 'do his work' and his anger might have had more to do with the realisation that he was being used for a scheme which had nothing to do with his world or his own aims. And his inquiries regarding the prices of fruit could have arisen out of the innocent interest of a poor man in finding out what people in Mombasa or Nairobi spent on luxurious food items such as fruit which he could rarely afford to buy for himself in Jamnagar. He could
also, though, have given in to a deep seated suspicion of shopkeepers whereby he would have displayed a widespread attitude shared not only by Sidis but by many other people in Gujarat. In Gujarat itself, merchants and shopkeepers ('Banias') are stereotypically represented as 'miserly' and 'cheating.' The author also accuses Sulemanbhai of having stolen some of his possessions. While it is impossible to judge the truth of this statement it should be noted that the suspicion that those who have less are prone to steal from those who have more is very widespread. Accusations of theft, moreover, give rise to frequent quarrels within the Sidi jamat as well. If it had been possible to ask Sulemanbhai himself, he might have said that Sidi Abdulabhai had given him the things as a gift.

The rumour, finally, that the African Government had sent cloves and money for the benefit of the whole caste which had been withheld by those in control (Sureshbhai and Sidi Abdulabhai), is based on a fundamental value of the Sidi caste which, however, is almost always violated by reality. Most Sidis are strong believers in a kind of caste egalitarianism. That means that everybody believes to have a claim to whatever resource is associated with the name of Sidis as a jamat. When an organisation such as the 'Negro Welfare Board' came into being, it seemed only natural that, although only two people went on the actual journey, its immediate benefit should come to every Sidi. The rumour gave perhaps only a vaguely perceived expectation a concrete form: Since Africa was apparently so rich and the 'African Government' cared for poor Sidis in Gujarat, it had sent gifts of equal amounts for each of them - just as a benevolent and wealthy follower patronising Sidi saints would do. If things do not work out that way it is not because the expectation is at fault but because 'big people' cheat 'small people' - a very common experience in the social world of Sidis. Where Abdulabhai saw gross ingratitude and shame, other Sidis perceived injustice.

Thus, the politics surrounding the journey of two Sidis to East Africa and which implicitly or explicitly structure the book bring to the fore pronounced differences of class. These were precisely the reason why the Sidi community did not follow Sidi Abdulabhai as a leader, why the Negro Welfare Board was soon after their return dissolved and why the book has been more or less forgotten.

To sum up, the book is a rare testimony of experiences of Sidis from Gujarat in East Africa. One might have expected that it contains a search for African roots buried by the ruptures of slavery - something like an Indian Ocean answer to the transatlantic African diaspora. In a way it is, but only insofar as it brings out quite different conceptions and strategies of constructing a Sidi social identity and the place of 'Africa' therein. Thus, while the author spoke of East Africa as the mul vatan (original place) of Sidis, he did not contrast an 'African Sidi identity' to a 'Gujarati identity.' What mattered for him were social relationships to various categories of persons - to the kings of Bhavnagar, Gujarati merchants in East Africa, or other Sidis in Gujarat. In the same vein, he saw one of the goals of the journey in 'refreshing our relationships with African Sidis.'

In East Africa, however, social encounters with Africans remained peripheral, while the author and his companion moved in a familiar environment shaped by the use of
Gujarati language, food and behavioural codes. Moreover, the author was much more concerned with the present than with the past. In his view, the most immediate questions to be addressed derived from modern changes and the ways in which his caste (Sidis) would be enabled to progress economically and educationally in post-independent Gujarat. The founding of the 'Negro Welfare Board' and the journey itself marked an attempt in the early 1970s by Sidi Abdulabhai to establish political leadership in the caste for achieving these goals. In this scheme, the past becomes relevant as a way of legitimising present claims to leadership in two directions, i.e. in relation to the state and to the caste. Of the past, in Gujarat it was not slavery on which one could successfully build claims to leadership, but on relationships to kings or the status of a caste in the hierarchy of a kingdom. In the 1970s as much as now this strategy is applied by many middle and lower castes struggling for political recognition and it also shaped the views and actions of Sidi Abdulabhai when he compiled the book.

NOTES:


2 Since a few years, though, a small Sidi group of goma performers from Gujarat is travelling around the world and has performed 2002 in Zanzibar.

3 'Sidi' is the name of communities or castes (jamat, kom) of Africans in India. In addition, it is used as the general denomination for Africans not only in India but in Africa or America as well. 'Negro' is normally used by Sidis in Gujarat only when quoting outsiders.

4 I wish to thank the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung for a generous research grant.

5 A popular Charan singer is Bikhudan Gadhvi who sings and recites the story of how the Maharaja met with Imandar Mubarak.

6 After independence, Rajput kings were allowed to keep a part of the former state property as private possessions until 1971.

7 The page numbers of the book start with 1 (introduction), and again with 1 once the actual travel report begins. I refer to this as (2).

8 Whereas Sidis in Saurashtra have been classified into the administrative category of "Scheduled Tribe", which entitles them to reserved seats in educational and government institutions, this has been denied to Sidis in South Gujarat (e.g. Baroda or Bharuch). The reason for this unequal treatment of Sidis in Gujarat arises from the fact that few Adivasi or Scheduled Tribes live on the Saurashtra peninsula, whereas they are found in large numbers in South Gujarat. Thus, while district governments with a low Adivasi population are interested in including Sidis, those with a high percentage of Adivasi are not. In addition, Sidis face great competition in such districts. As a result, many (but not all) Sidis in Saurashtra, especially in the former Rajput capitals of Bhavnagar and Jamnagar, are economically slightly more secure than Sidis on the mainland and South Gujarat. But even here, educational and economic differences can be quite pronounced, as the social situation of the two travellers to East Africa shows.

9 One important dimension of the cult of Bava Gor has to do with the identification of thieves through a ritual ordeal.

10 During my fieldwork in the 1980s I met Sidi Sulemanbhai at the shrine of Bava Gor in Jamnagar where he still was the mujavar (ritual caretaker of the shrine). He was an old man by then (other Sidi claimed he was "one hundred and six years old") who told me that he had travelled to Africa "with a Gujarati merchant". When I asked whether he had worked for the merchant, he said no, he had gone to show "the Sidi there how we in Gujarat do goma". He neither talked about Sidi Abdulabhai nor did he draw my attention to the existence of the book.