India’s hidden African communities by Dr Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya

Indians with African ancestry often go unrecognised but perhaps this is to be expected in a country with a population of 1.2 billion whose diversity is as wide as the Indian Ocean.

Africans traders, sailors and missionaries moved across the Indian Ocean of their own free will for centuries. From the 13th century, African traders operated from Jan­jira, an island off the west coast of India, and from the 16th century Janjira became a power base for Africans who ruled not one, but two states in western India. In 1948, a year after independence, when India’s princely states were incorporated into the new India, the states of Janjira and Sachin were ruled by Sidis – the name by which Indians of African descent are generally known today.

Elite Sidis still live in India, though they have intermarried and are not very numer­ous now. Some have been incorporated into Indian history, but their Arabic names do not reveal their ethnic identity. For ex­ample, Malik Ambar, an Ethiopian sold to slavery by his parents, became regent min­ister of Ahmednagar in 1600. While Am­bar’s achievements are unsurpassed, he was not the only Sidi who reached the corridors of power.

Elite military slavery paved the way for Sidis to gain control and even establish states that were subsequently ruled by a succession of Sidis. Janjira was ruled by Si­dis for 330 years (1618-1948) and no doubt the democratic system of electing lead­ers based on merit, aptitude and capabil­ity rather than on social rank and heredity contributed to the longevity of African rule in Janjira. Sachin, which was established later, was ruled by Sidis for about 160 years (1791-1948).

Eastern India was also ruled by Africans for a short spell at the end of the 15th cen­tury (1487-1493). The rise to power was through their close association with the ruling elite. These Africans were called Habshis, denoting their association with Al-Habash (Ethiopia). Habshis were palace guards in the Bengal Sultanate and from their intimate position with the local elite, overthrew the ruler and gained supremacy. But unlike in Gujarat, Sidi rule was short-lived in Bengal, lasting only for seven years.

There were several waves of African mi­grations to India, and the history of Sidis is multilayered. Over the centuries, there have been numerous pushes and pulls with Africans originating from various points of the continent and finding new homes in dif­ferent parts of India. Various legends and histories surround their arrival in India.

The majority of Sidis are hidden in the for­ests or villages of India. Those in urban areas are mistaken for tourists and foreigners until they begin to speak in the local languages. The presence of Sidis was brought to the fore when tourism was developed in the Gir for­est (Gujarat). There are about 25,000 Sidis spread out in Gujarat. Given the importance of western India and the Malabar Coast in the Indian Ocean trade, it is not surprising that Africans found their way to Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala and Goa.

But there are Sidis in other parts of India too. In the South Indian state of Karnata­ka, there are about 25,000 Sidis. Slaves of the Portuguese ran away from Goa to the neighbouring states of Karnataka, Maha-rashtra and Gujarat and formed marooned communities. In another South Indian state, Andhra Pradesh, there are about 10,000 Si­dis, many of whose ancestors were brought from Yemen by the Nizams (rulers) of Hy­derabad to form an African cavalry. After India’s independence, these Sidis lost their important role within the power structure but continued to live in Hyderabad. In Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh), the Sidis are de­scendants of the Nawab’s African cavalry and female bodyguards. African women soldiers fought against the British during the Indian Mutiny in 1857.

There are Sidis to be found all over In­dia – in Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Being a heterogeneous group, they have lost whatever African languages they spoke in the process of settling down. A few of the elderly can recall some Swahili. But as many generations were born in India, most Sidis today speak the local languages -Gu­jarati, Marathi, Kannada and Telugu, for example.

Sidis are Indian, and blend in with the multicultural mosaic of India. In terms of clothing, housing and language, they can­not be differentiated from other Indians. Sidis have all but adapted to life in India, similar to the numerous other migrant groups. What really sets Sidis apart from other Indians are their artistic traditions. Sidis blend into India’s diversity but their music and dance signal a connection with Africa. Melodies and themes in Sidi mu­sic have been identified as Tanzanian and Ethiopian.

Sidi servants once entertained the noble courts with their ngoma drums, rattles and conch shells. Music and dance took on an important function, as it gave them some­thing of Africa to hold on to while adapting to their new country. Sidis in Gujarat felt a need to form a new identity and entrenched some aspects of their ancestral culture by gathering at the dargahs (shrines) of their Sidi Sufi saints: Bava Gor, Bava Habash and Mai Mishra.

Sidi religious practices involve music, song and dance. Their polyrhythmic drum­ming style, known as goma, brings their African roots to the fore. Though origi­nally a religious performance, goma was brought to the stage by the Sidi Sufis who considered the theatrical performances an extension of their worship. African drums (mugarman, which stands on feet; musindo, similar to a dhol, or double-headed drum, but only played with the hands; and armpit drums), malunga (braced musical bows), mai mishra (coconut rattle) and nafir (conch trumpet) add to the authenticity of the performance.

There are several goma groups, and the tradition has become a vehicle for Sidis to travel outside their village, across the coun­try and overseas. Dressed in animal skins decorated with peacock feathers, and with painted faces, Sidis perform their African-derived music all over the world – in Ma­laysia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, the USA and the UK. One audience member in Delhi admitted to having seen Sidis on the Discovery Channel but had not known that they lived in India.

Some Sidis believe they are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad’s first muezzin, Hazrat Bilal, an Ethiopian. Bilal’s beautiful voice and devotion to the Prophet won him this important position.

Over the past decade, scholarly interest in the Sidis has grown. They have estab­lished the Sidi Goma Al-Mubrik Charitable Trust, which is administered and managed by Sidis. The Trust aims to enhance the economic, social and educational needs of the community. This exemplary initiative might be a model for migrant communities to follow throughout the world.