

Bombay Africans 1850-1910 (Part One)

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● Introduction

This exhibition reveals the lives of a group of African men known as the 'Bombay Africans': Sidi Mubarak Bombay, Abdullah Susi, James Chuma, Wikitani, Mathew Wellington and Jacob Wainwright. They were all, through their knowledge of languages, landscapes and diplomacy, invaluable members of 19th and early 20th century British expeditions into East Africa. Women were also present on these expeditions. However, the record of their contribution has been lost to history.



From left to right: Agnes Livingstone, Thomas Livingstone, daughter and son of David Livingstone, Abdullah Susi, James Chuma and Reverend Horace Waller at Newstead Abbey, Nottingham discussing the journals, maps and plans made by the late David Livingstone.
By R Allen & Sons, 1874

The results of these expeditions were recorded in sketches, photographs, maps and written accounts. These records illustrated Victorian attitudes towards the so called 'dark continent', attitudes that often referred to Africans as either 'uncivilized natives' or 'noble savages'. As a result, the contributions that Africans made to the exploration of East Africa appeared as mere footnotes in the history of exploration. The Bombay Africans also contributed to other aspects of political and economic life. This includes their roles in the antislavery movement and with Christian organisations such as the Church Missionary Society which led to the formation of the first East African settlements for returning 'freed slaves'.

"The vague expression of the 'Expedition'... is very apt to swallow up a subordinate's (guide's) individuality and valuable services, throwing him into the background, where he is more likely to be forgotten. To obviate such a fate for the invaluable headman of the East Central African Expedition...let me bring him especially under the readers notice."
Joseph Thomson FRGS, 1881



Joseph Thomson with Chuma (left) and Makatubu
Publication: Joseph Thomson African Explorer (London: Low & Co. 1896)
by Rev J B Thomson 1896

"I would like these stories to reach many more people – especially the generation of my children and grandchildren. You don't know who you are until you know where you come from." Mwatumu, Tanzanian Women's Association

The exhibition has been created in partnership with RGS-IBG fellow and historian Cliff Pereira and the Tanzanian Women's Association (London), Friends of Maasai People (Harrow), Congolese Community in the UK, Lancaster Youth Group (Ladbroke Grove, London), Ghanaian Elders Group (Black Cultural Archives, London) and O-Bay Community Trust (Edmonton, London). Members of these groups identified and discussed materials from the Society's collection and their responses are included in the following pages.

Please note: Where relevant, the names of places and peoples have been left in their original form. For example, 'Bombay' has been used instead of 'Mumbai'.

● African Diaspora & the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean Trade in Enslaved Africans

For millennia, Africans have been travelling across the Indian Ocean to the Middle East and Asia. Many travelled freely and settled. They included merchants, sailors, Christian and Muslim pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem and Mecca, soldiers, guards, fishermen, incense collectors, diplomatic envoys, conquerors and adventurers.

However, the majority of Africans endured forced migration to Asia as slaves. Slavery dominated the lives of the Bombay Africans, many of whom were enslaved as young children and transported across the Indian Ocean. Millions of enslaved Africans were transported across the Atlantic and Indian oceans. However, there were key differences in the experiences of those subjected to these trades:

- Proportionately larger numbers of children were enslaved in the Indian Ocean than in the Atlantic
- Enslavement as part of the Indian Ocean trade took a variety of forms, including plantation labour and within domestic settings
- The scale of trade varied greatly over time and place in the Indian Ocean, small vessels carrying twenty enslaved Africans were common
- Those that were enslaved, and their children could gain their freedom from their masters and within Islamic states did attain high social status



Capture of Madagascar slaves

Publication: Scenes in Africa, for the amusement and instruction of little tarry-at-home travellers by Rev. Isaac Taylor (London: Harris & Son 1820) by J Harrison 1820

Such differences had an impact on how African communities developed outside Africa.

“It appears that those (enslaved) that were moved across the Indian Ocean maintained some of their culture as opposed to the Atlantic side where it is much more difficult to identify their cultures and roots. This also made it easier to stop the Atlantic slave trade using law as it was an economic trade. The Indian Ocean trade seems more ingrained in the societies that supported it and hence more difficult to remove.”

Abubakar, Tanzanian Women’s Association

Slavery in East and Northeast Africa

The use of slaves was common in many African societies. For example, domestic slavery was practiced by traditional societies such as the Buganda, and Bunyoro Kingdoms of Uganda, the Yao and Nyassa of Malawi, and the Merina of Madagascar. A combination of plantation and domestic slavery was practiced among the Christian kingdoms of Ethiopia, and the Islamic societies of the Somali, Swahili and Comoro Islands and Zanzibar.

The coastal cities of Eastern Africa were the end of trade routes that stretched far into the interior. One route ran 2,400 km (1500 miles) through Kitale in Western Kenya into Eastern Uganda and to the Congo Basin. Another, the notorious slave market at Bagamoyo, was fed by a route through Tabora in central Tanzania and Ujiji on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. These trade routes also served as starting and finishing points for the 19th century expeditions into Africa's interior.



Map of Eastern Africa showing old trade routes and ethnic groups by Cliff Pereira, 2007

Red lines depict trade routes and names appearing in orange are ethnic groups.

● British Exploration of Africa

British expeditions to Africa

There was intense European interest in Africa during the late 19th century and the Royal Geographical Society supported many of the expeditions during this period.

- 1848** Kilimanjaro Expedition, J Rebman
- 1849** Mt. Kenya Expedition, J Krapf
- 1855** Somaliland, R Burton/ J Speke (RGS expedition)
- 1857-1858** Source of the Nile, R Burton/J Speke (RGS expedition)
- 1860-1863** Great Lakes, J Speke/J A Grant (RGS expedition)
- 1864-1865** Zambezi Expedition, D Livingstone
- 1866-1867** Tanganyika, D Livingstone
- 1867-1873** Last Journey, D Livingstone
- 1871-1872** North Tanganyika, H M Stanley
- 1873-1875** Livingstone Relief Expedition, V L Cameron (RGS expedition)
- 1874-1877** Congo Expedition, H M Stanley
- 1879-1880** Central Lakes, J Thomson/H Johnston (RGS expedition)
- 1881** Rovuma, J Thomson
- 1879-1882** Congo, H M Stanley
- 1883-1884** Masailand, J Thomson (RGS expedition)
- c1886** Kilimanjaro, H Johnston

Exploration took place for many reasons; the 'discovery' and identification of key geographical features, to increase trade, consolidate territories and spread Christianity.

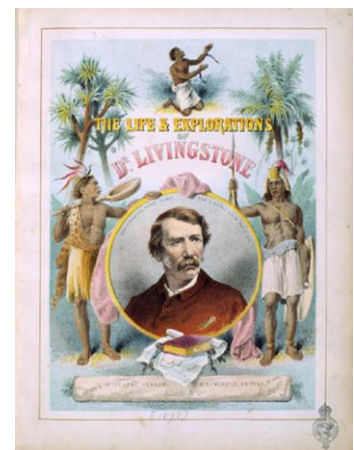
David Livingstone is the best known explorer from this period. He combined a zeal for geographical discovery, Christian missionary work and a strong opposition to slavery. Other explorers of the time included Harry Johnston, Joseph Thomson, Captain V L Cameron, James Grant, Henry Morton Stanley and John H Speke. All of these explorers employed Bombay Africans on their expeditions.



Captain V Cameron by Maull & Co,
Date unknown



Sir Harry Johnston, May, 1900



Frontispiece from 'The Life and Explorations of Dr Livingstone' by John S. Roberts (Adam & Co., London/Newcastle on Tyne, 1878).

