

# Bombay Africans 1850-1910 (Part Three)

- Bombay Africans' Legacy
- Community Perspectives

## ● Bombay Africans' Legacy

*"There is a negative feeling that Africans didn't do anything for themselves and in the shaping of the history of their lands which is not true." Mwatumu, Tanzanian Women's Association*

- **The Bombay Africans and the Antislavery Campaign**

An important legacy of the Bombay Africans is their role in the antislavery campaign. Despite British treaties with the Sultan of Zanzibar and the presence of the Royal Navy, slavery continued. The local tribes and traders involved in trafficking often resented the presence of the Bombay Africans.

The Frere Town and Rabai settlements provided refuge for locally enslaved Africans. Occasionally, the settlements themselves were threatened by raids and a bell was sounded as a warning. The Frere Town bell tower exists to the present day. Bombay Africans known for their antislavery activities include Reverend William Jones, who helped free hundreds of Africans and lobbied the British and Zanzibari authorities, and Abi Sidi, known for establishing a settlement for 300-400 formerly enslaved Africans near Mombasa.

- **The social and economic legacies of the Bombay Africans in East Africa**

The Bombay Africans have left a considerable legacy as a result of the education and skills acquired in India, their active role in the Christian missions, and their part in the exploration of Africa.

By 1880 there were over three thousand Bombay Africans in East Africa, with the largest groups at Frere Town and Rabai in Kenya. Their interactions with local people ensured that the education received by the Bombay Africans whilst at Indian missions was passed on to other Africans. The full impact and legacy of the Bombay Africans is still being researched.

### **Missionary Activity and Education**

Rabai saw the first mission school in Kenya in 1846. Until then education in Kenya had been restricted to the Moslem "Madressa" schools attached to mosques. The Rabai school and another at Frere Town provided Africans in this area with their first access to education. A number of schools were established across present-day Kenya, Uganda and Northern Tanzania and were run by descendants of the Bombay Africans.

### **Development of Transport Networks**

The overland trade and expedition routes trodden by the Bombay Africans influenced the development of many East African railways and modern roads. The best known of these are the route of the "Lunatic Line" or Uganda Railway and the Central Line in Tanzania. These railway networks later became the focus for development.



Uganda Railway by R.E. Critchley, 1907–18

### **Political Development**

The Frere Town settlement was the most important settlement of its kind to be established by the Church Missionary Society in Eastern Africa and provided support for the establishment of the British sphere of influence that eventually became the state of Kenya. Bombay Africans and their descendants were important in the formation of African political associations in the 1950's.



Frere Town ferry, Kenya by W. McGregor Ross, 1909

### **African Business**

The Frere Town community developed its own industries at a time when industry in Mombasa was mainly in the hands of Asians and Arabs. Originally this industry produced bricks, tiles, ironwork and furniture for other missions. Today the sprawling workshops of Kisauni and Bombolulu in Kenya are the result of this early development.

### **African Civil Service**

Mission educated Africans from Frere Town and Rabai provided the first African clerks for the early colonial administration of Kenya and Uganda.

## Journalism

In 1887 a printing press was established in Frere Town by James Jones - the son of the Bombay African Rev. William Jones. He was the first printer in Kenya. Bombay Africans from Frere Town and Rabai provided editors for the first English and Kiswahili publications, such as *The Coast Express* and *Mwalimu*.

- **Other legacies**

The impact of the Bombay African community can be traced to other parts of Africa.

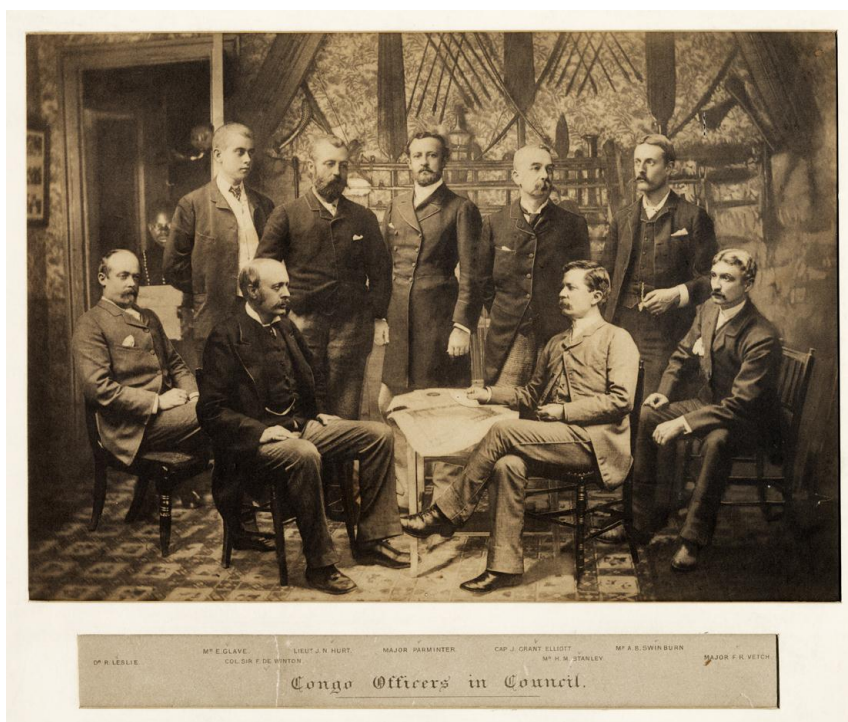
## Founding of Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo

In 1881, Bombay African Abdullah Susi joined Stanley on an expedition. They travelled up the Red Sea, through the Mediterranean to the mouth of the Congo River. During their trek up the river, the party established a "station" where Susi took responsibility for organising the construction of the site. It was named Leopoldville and is now known as Kinshasa.

## Education and political awareness

The social and political awareness created by the Bombay Africans and the Africans educated by the missions in Kenya, alongside the role of the Bombay Africans in journalism were factors that led to independence movements throughout Eastern Africa.

Bombay African Wikitani assisted the Free Church of Scotland Mission to set up the 'The Livingstonia Mission' of Northern Malawi, now known as Livingstonia University. It became one of the most important mission schools in Central Africa as many politicians and leading figures in Malawi and Zambia were educated there. The Rev. David Kaunda, father of Kenneth Kaunda, the first president of Zambia went to the Livingstonia Mission School and was inspired to set up a similar mission school in Northern Zambia.



Congo Officers in Council 1880, Photographer Unknown Back row (left to right): Dr R. Leslie, Mr E. Glave, Lt. J. N. Hurt, Major Parminter, Captain J. Grant Elliott, Mr A. B. Swinburn and Major F.R. Vetch. Seated in centre (left to right): Colonel Sir F. De Winton and Mr H. M. Stanley

## ● Community Perspectives

Community partners provided invaluable feedback on the stories of the Bombay Africans and they posed pertinent questions to reveal issues that still resonate today.

The community groups represented the East and Central African countries of the Congo, Kenya and Tanzania. Groups from Ghana and Nigeria provided a West African perspective. They examined historic materials such as original journals, maps and photographs related to their respective regions alongside the Bombay African stories. The workshop sessions offered a chance for people to reflect on their individual and collective national histories and provided a space for people to discuss issues that are related to these types of historical records

***“Our children do not see these items and it is important for them to know about their history.” Fred, Congolese Community in the UK***



Chief of the Bena Tubeya on the 'Stone of authority', Congo Photographer: A Van Den Heuvei, 1945

### **Interpretation of history and identity**

Looking at historic collections produced by Europeans raised many questions about who ‘owns’ history and who can be empowered by or excluded from historical narratives. Two areas were highlighted during these poignant and direct discussions:

#### **On interpretation of history:**

***“I remember my father talking of his experiences - he had to walk 5 miles to get drinking water – experiences most never have. The sacrifices made to enable us to do what we want. The last time my dad visited Ghana, he got emotional – looking back at where he came from and where he got to. People from my generation don’t really see life from that perspective.”*** Beyonder, Ghanaian poet

***“It is a shame that not many people know about this story... I never heard or knew that Africans lived in India and I like to follow up the story of those who stayed and what their thinking is...how much of their original African culture has remained...”*** Uli, Tanzanian Women’s Association

On Identity:

*“The people in those entire photos are nameless...”* Fred, Congolese Community in the UK



Kings and Chiefs, Ghana  
Photographer: J M Campbell

*“Young people don’t know of the issues, efforts and battles their ancestors have faced in a positive way. Things are presented to the young in a negative way - so who’s going take on board the negative stereotyping? You come from slaves or that your history began when slavery started - that is what many young people think. They don’t know different and cannot answer other people’s questions about their roots. A Chinese person may ask a person of African origin where their roots are - they may know but if they are asked what language they speak, the young Black person will answer English and the Chinese person will laugh! That’s because they (the Chinese) understand what it means to be colonised but they don’t understand the feeling of losing traditions.”*  
Beyond, Ghanaian poet

*“Were the freed slaves really free in the Indian Ocean when they did not have the option to return back to where they came from? Freedom means to have choice; they are still slaves of sorts if they cannot truly decide where they should go.”* Baruani, Tanzanian Women’s Association

### Young people’s reflections

Members of a youth group and two African supplementary schools visited the Society to provide their creative interpretation of a selection of archive images of Africa and the stories of the Bombay Africans. While many of young people were born in Britain their families provide connections to Eritrea, Gambia, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica and St Lucia. They explored a range of complex and emotive themes through their writing and they raised the following questions:

Why were the enslaved not returned to Africa once they were freed?

Where did slavery begin and who were the slavers?

Why were the enslaved so young?

Is slavery the reason for poverty in Africa today?

The writings and artworks provide an insight into the impact of the stories and images on the young people whose ages ranged from six to eighteen years.

Poetry, prose and quotes on slavery:

*What's happening, I was just a Nigerian the other day, but now am living with a white family in a rich house. It doesn't feel right. I haven't seen any of my family since I arrived here, what is happening? In the 10 commandments it says everyone should be treated equally. Now I sit and think, is there really a God? Now God answer my question, what's happening?* **Conrad**

*Chained up in slavery, marks that look like pain.* **Stephanie**

*I was a King before they took me and betrayed me and enslaved me.  
I can't even remember my given title. I was the man at the top and now I am down at the bottom. I realise I was a prisoner but they never held me captive.  
It was my body not my soul that held me back. It takes time to imagine being a slave. People just think we work hard and sweat all day.  
But imagine you haven't got the right to talk or imagine you haven't got the right to walk and imagine you haven't got the right to your name. Always walking around, head down in shame.* **Savannah**

*Who are these invaders of my country?  
If you look closely you can see  
This pain in my heart in my soul  
It's only the start of a never ending hole.* **Lakeisha**

*The crashing waves, sand between my toes, people dying in the sun in graves.* **Jesse**

**"The story of the Bombay Africans makes me want to know where my ancestors are from."** Ellis

**"The thing about slavery is the imprisoning of my people has corrupted the very way we all live. They have taken over our history and confused us all."** Kiah

**"Why did this have to start? They can take your dignity but not your pride."** Caddesia

Poetry and thoughts on traditions and identity:



*Red is the colour of blood, red is the colour of pride.  
My wealth is vast and healthy, I am a Maasai.  
Taken from Mombasa to Bombay, away from my home, my cattle, my clan.  
Taken to a strangers house to wander the unknown, but I know that daylight follows a dark night.* **Peris**

*At night when it is windy and cold, the warrior does not complain, he stands proud and bold.  
When the warriors jump and hop, the dust rises as they kick and stomp.* **Davis**

Masai men and boys by T T Behrens, 1905

## Migration and the contemporary Afro-Asian communities in Asia

Stories and experience of migration were common to many participants. Many identified with travelling and the idea of displacement. The Bombay Africans stories raised questions about the presence of Africans in both Asia and Britain today; about their lives and status in the societies that they are now part of.

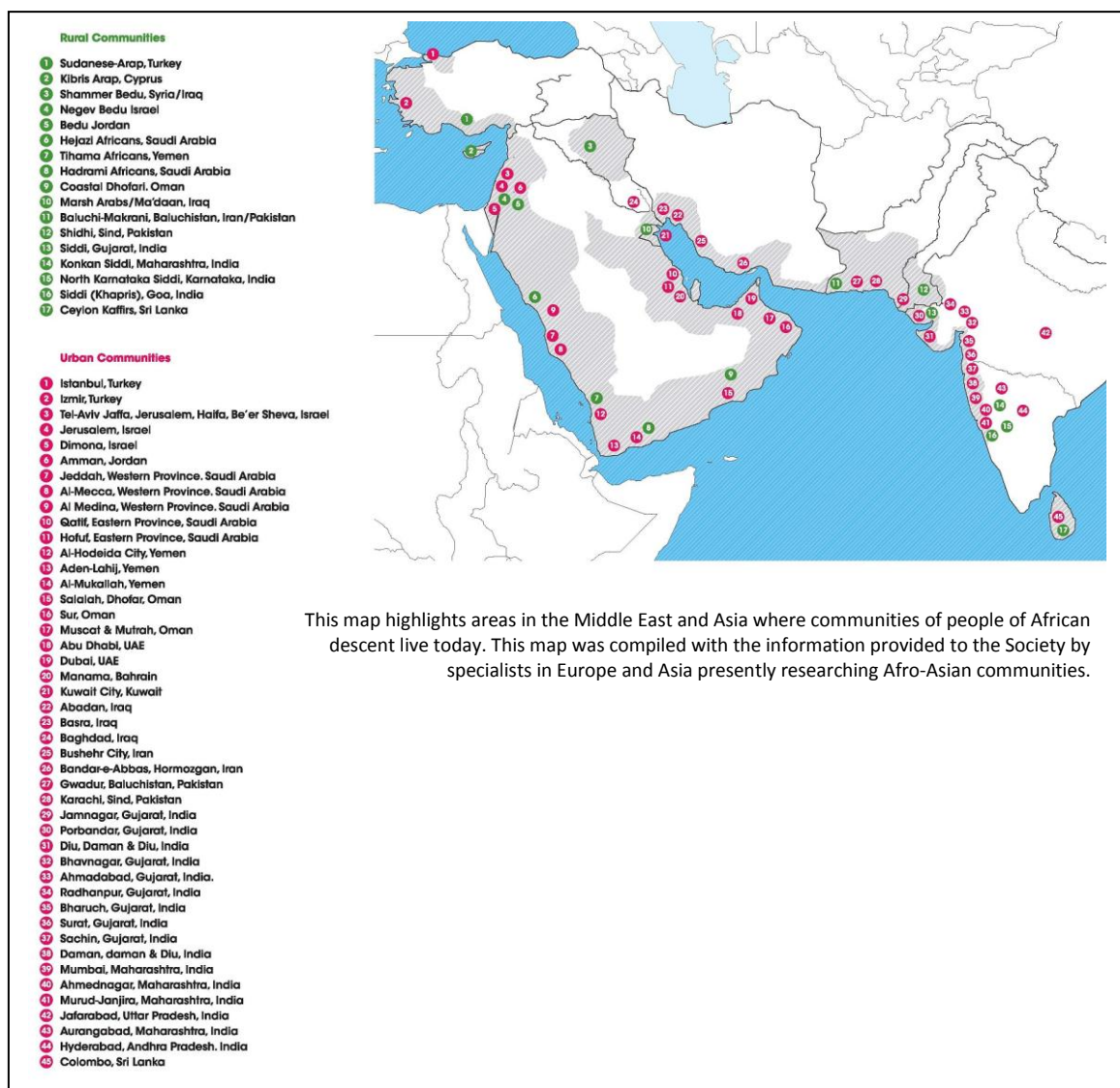
### On migration:

*“Independence gave us some authority (and a chance for justice). You knew that you would not let anyone cheat you again. It opened so many avenues. I was able to work and make my way to London. It was not easy for people to come here, but I did and raised my children and helped people back home. Independence bought freedom and responsibility.”* Georgina, Black Cultural Archives

### On Afro-Asian communities in Asia today:

*“How do you define yourself? As Indian, African, Goans...this brings to the surface another point that globalisation started way back. This makes us world citizens!”* Mwatumu, Tanzanian Women’s Association

*“Do they understand the value of their origins, their roots and of Africa, or are these values disappearing and they are adopting other (Indian) values?”* Ackys, Congolese Community in the UK



This map highlights areas in the Middle East and Asia where communities of people of African descent live today. This map was compiled with the information provided to the Society by specialists in Europe and Asia presently researching Afro-Asian communities.

## Credits

### Exhibition

Cliff Pereira  
Vandana Patel

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