

# Bombay Africans 1850-1910 (Part Two)

## ● The Bombay Africans

For every European who ventured into Africa there was a team of often a hundred people composed of mainly African gun-bearers, porters, servants, guides, interpreters, soldiers, cooks and their women companions.

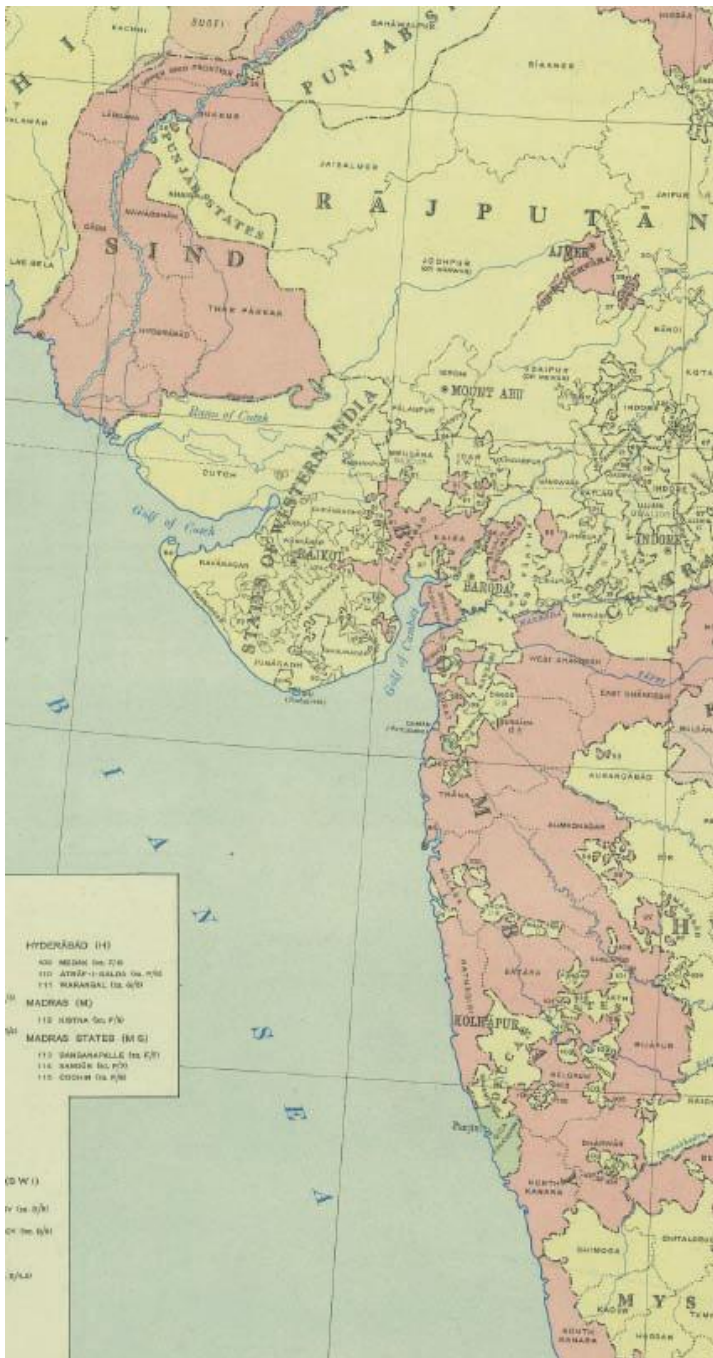
Amongst them were the 'Bombay Africans', a phrase coined in India. Originally forced into slavery in Africa, these individuals were liberated by the British Royal Navy from Arab slaving boats known as 'dhows'. They were then taken to India, to Bombay, and also Karachi, which is now in Pakistan.



View of Bombay harbor by Frith & Co, 1883

During the mid-1800s a number of Christian missionary orphanages were established in the Bombay Presidency of India. The town of Nasik hosted the first orphanage that provided shelter and education specifically for liberated Africans. Roman Catholic missions at Bandora (Bandra in Mumbai) and Poona (Pune) were also established. At these orphanages the freed Africans learnt English, Hindi, and technical skills. This proved to be useful when they returned to Africa and later joined European expeditions.

Sir Henry Bartle Frere, Governor of the Bombay Presidency and President of the Royal Geographical Society (1873-74), suggested that British explorers recruiting staff for African expeditions should employ the African men from the Indian orphanages. His actions were later recognized when the first settlement for Africans returning from India to East Africa was named Frere Town. Hundreds of Bombay Africans returned to Africa, either independently or with the aid of the missionary societies. Of this group at least thirty can be identified as having taken part in African expeditions.



Western Indian provinces and states, including the British controlled Bombay Presidency highlighted in pink, 1938

The Bombay Africans can be loosely divided into four groups; each defined by the nature of their liberation, their experience as freed people and their return to Africa. The groups are:

- **The Sidi Group**
- **The Livingstone Group**
- **The Nasik Group, also known as the Thetis Group**
- **The Frere Town-Rabai Group**

Little is known about most Bombay Africans. However, through the journals and accounts of European explorers alongside evidence of African migrations, these 'ordinary men' are transformed into 'men of exploration.'

## The Sidi Group: Sidi Mubarak Bombay

- **Sidi Mubarak Bombay c1820-1885**

A common term for enslaved Africans in India was Sidi (or Seedi) from the Arabic Seyyedi meaning “lord” or “master”. Sidi Mubarak Bombay is the most celebrated of the Sidi Bombay Africans. Taken to Asia as a slave, he gained his freedom in the Bombay Presidency. He later returned to Africa and worked for many of the 19th century British explorers including Burton, Speke, Grant, Stanley and Cameron



Sidi Mubarak, date and photographer unknown



Travels of Sidi Mubarak Bombay by Cliff Pereira, 2007

As a result, Mubarak became the most widely travelled man in Africa, having covered some 9,600km (5970 miles) overland, much of this on foot. He and John Speke traced the source of the Nile. Mubarak became the only recorded person to travel both the Nile from its source in Lake Victoria in Uganda to Cairo, and to cross Africa from Zanzibar in the east, to Angola on the west coast. In addition, he also sailed the length of the Red Sea and around the Cape of Good Hope. For his role with the Speke expeditions the Royal Geographical Society awarded Mubarak a silver medal and provided him with a pension in 1876.

Accounts of Mubarak exist in rare photographs and from expedition diaries. While Europeans rarely considered Africans their equals, Mubarak was respected and his company and negotiating skills within the expeditions were valued. Richard Burton provides an early description:

*“The gem of our party, however, is one Sidi Mubarak, who has taken to himself the agnomen of Bombay. His sooty skin, and teeth sharp pointed denote his origin from Uhiao (on the borders of present day Tanzania and Mozambique); he is one of those model seedies, runaway slaves, employed as lascars and coal-trimmers who with chaff, grimace, and peals of laughter, varied now and then by dance and song, delight the passengers in an Anglo-Indian steamer. Bombay sold at Kilwa in early youth, a process of which he talks with many broad grins was carried to Cutch by some Banyan and then became a libertinus (a free man), he looks fondly back upon the hour of his adoption, and he sighs for the day when a few dollars will enable him to return (to his Uhiao homeland).”*

Burton a few years later in 1859 recounts Mubarak’s popularity:

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*"My companion's gun-carrier, Seedy Mubarak Bombay, a Negro from Uhiao, has twice been sketched in Blackwood; he also requires no further celebrity."* Mubarak spoke a number of languages, a skill vital to Speke who could not speak Arabic, Kiswahili or any other African languages. As Burton described:  
*"...speaking a little broken Hindustani... he began by escorting us to Fuga as head gun-bearer. On our march to the lakes he was the confident servant and interpreter of my companion, he being the only man with whom the latter could converse, and in the second expedition of Capt. Speke and Grant [1860-63] he was promoted to Command the Waswahili."*



Sidi Mubarak by J A Grant, 1860

Omar from the Congolese Community in the UK comments on the importance of languages: ***"People were very hostile near the Congo. It was impossible to pass through the centre of the country. Some Africans did not allow strangers to trespass on their lands. He (Mubarak) would have had to use diplomacy. They also used to give to the chiefs goods such as salt and gunpowder. Language played an important role in the exploration. The big clash came between languages such as Swahili and Lingala. That is why Mubarak could not reach the centre of the Congo."***

After retirement Mubarak worked for the Church Missionary Society. He died in 1885.





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



Abdullah Susi by Maull & Co



Carved section of bark from the tree under which David Livingstone's Heart was buried, 1873

Susi did recover and in 1881 he joined Stanley on an expedition up the Congo River and helped to establish Leopoldville. Afterwards, it is believed that Susi sailed around the Cape of Good Hope to reach Zanzibar. Between 1883 and 1891 Susi worked with the Universities Mission to Central Africa as a caravan leader. He was baptised as David in 1886. He died on the 5th of May 1891.

- **Amoda c1850 – 1876**

Less is known about Amoda, but after his work with Livingstone he joined other expeditions. He joined Stanley until 1876 and became chief of the crew of the Lady Alice on Lake Victoria. He died in Uganda on 29th January 1876.

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## The Livingstone Group: James Chuma

- **James Chuma c.1850 -1882**

James Chuma spent half of his 32 years on five expeditions. Eight years of this time was spent with Livingstone and, like Susi, he travelled to London after Livingstone's funeral. He was held in high esteem by all British explorers he worked with and was known for his reliability, resourcefulness and commitment. In 1881 he was presented with a silver medal by the Royal Geographical Society and a sword.

After Livingstone's death, Chuma worked for the Universities Mission to Central Africa in Zanzibar. In 1879-80 he joined Joseph Thomson and Keith Johnston on the Royal Geographical Society expedition to the Central Lakes. Chuma was baptized in 1865 and named James. He died in 1882 in Zanzibar and his death was noted by Joseph Thomson:

*"A loss, however, I felt more immediately than that of Dr. Steere, was that of the well-known Chuma whom I hoped to have again with me as head-man. He also had died after a short but stirring life, having in his own special way, done so much to open up Africa to science and communication."*



James Chuma by Maull & Co, 1874

*"For eight long hazardous years he was the faithful servant of his liberator, and, when the spirit fled from that iron frame at last, it was Chumah, the liberated slave boy from the Shire Highlands, that led from Lobisa to Zanzibar those men who bore their dead master's body, and to whom we are so much in debted for the safety of the Doctor's journals and writings."* Excerpt from Sir Henry Bartle Frere's address to the Royal Geographical Society.

**The Nasik Group: Mathew Wellington and Jacob Wainright**

In 1860 the Nasik asylum in the Bombay Presidency of India received 200 slaves who had been liberated from an Arab dhow by HMS Thetis off Somalia. Among this group were five young men including Chingwembe (Mathew Wellington), Benjamin Rutton, Richard Rutton, Mabruki and Jacob Wainright. The Thetis Group formed the nucleus of the African community at Nasik and later migrated to East Africa where they settled at missions at Frere Town and Rabai.



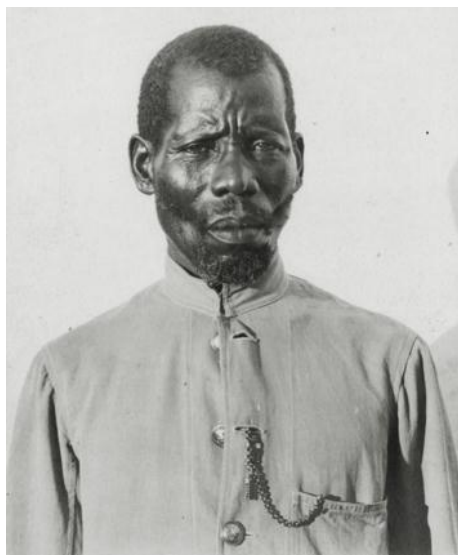
Nasik bazaar, India by D Oliver 1930-40

- **Chengwimbe (Mathew Wellington) 1847-1935**

Mathew Wellington was a pioneer in the establishment of the Frere Town community for liberated Africans, and was the last surviving of the Bombay Africans to have a connection with Livingstone. In 2007 his great grandson Rev. David Mwambila, noted:

***“Mathew Wellington is not a big name inside Emmanuel Church (Mombasa), but people have honoured him because he was one of the three faithful servants of Dr. Livingstone.”***

Wellington, born Chengwimbe, was captured at a young age and served as a domestic slave among the Yao tribe in North Mozambique. He was later sold for a “roll of cloth” at Kilwa in Tanzania and then taken to Zanzibar, only to be resold and transported by dhow to Arabia. It was from this dhow that he was liberated by the British Navy and taken to the Nasik asylum in Bombay, wherein he was baptized Mathew Wellington.



Mathew Wellington by W McGregor Ross, 1910

In 1872, he was employed as a member of an expedition searching for Dr Livingstone; the group also included Benjamin Rutton, Richard Rutton, Mabruki and Jacob Wainright. It was Wellington, along with James Chuma and Abdullah Susi, who found Livingstone’s body on the 1st May 1873. This group of men arranged the return of the body and Wellington drew up an inventory of Livingstone’s possessions including his expedition notes, sketches and maps.



Wellington later joined the Church Missionary Society mission at Frere Town in Kenya and also worked for the Imperial British East African Company and the Public Works Department of the Coast Protectorate at Mombasa. On his retirement in 1911 the Governor suggested that Wellington should be given a pension in recognition of his work with Livingstone. This was refused by the British Treasury and Wellington died on 6th June 1935.

Mwatumu of the Tanzanian Women’s Association recalls studying Tanzanian history:

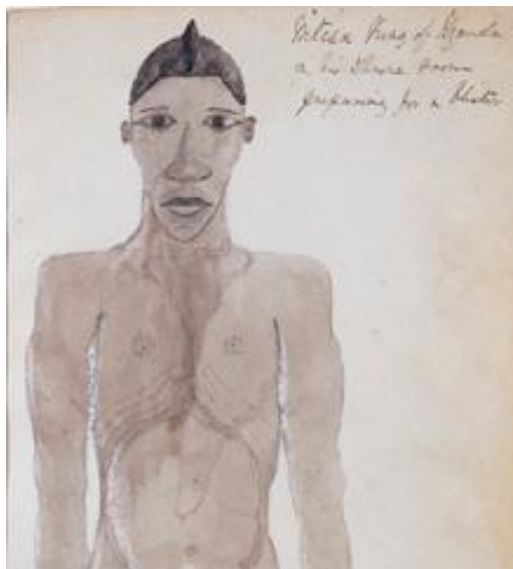
***“I studied Livingstone’s history when I was about 12 (in Tanzania). The teacher presented his story so that we all sympathised with him. We even cried at the hardships that he went through. We were told about his three African servants and friends that took out his heart when he died. Their names have stayed with me because it was a very emotional experience to hear. I feel cheated because we never heard the full story (of the Bombay Africans). It is important part of our history... I never knew what happened to slaves from East Africa.”***

- **Jacob Wainright (c1844 -1892)**

The Nasik group, of nineteen individuals, represents the largest of the Bombay African groups. However, details of only few individuals are known as many deserted expeditions and were never heard of again. There are enough accounts available to provide an overview of the Bombay Africans role and significance in European expeditions. Some went on to be awarded medals by the Royal Geographical Society for their contribution to explorations.

Jacob Wainright’s early history was similar to that of his fellow tribesman Mathew Wellington. Wainright joined Stanley’s search expedition and reached Livingstone at the famous meeting in 1872. Jacob stayed with Livingstone until his death when he read at the burial service. Wainright and Abdullah Susi cut the inscription on the tree trunk under which Livingstone’s heart is buried. He accompanied the explorer’s body to England, his journey funded by the Church Missionary Society. Even though he had not known Livingstone for very long, Wainright was the only Bombay African to attend Livingstone’s funeral in London, and was presented to Queen Victoria in 1874. He received a Royal Geographical Society medal on 24th September 1875.

Wainright's command of written and spoken Kiswahili and English was such that his role as interpreter was assured on expeditions and missionary convoys at the court of the Kabaka (King) Mutesa of Uganda. He later became the official scribe to the royal court and dedicated much of his working life to spreading Christianity in Uganda.



Kabaka Mutesa of Baganda, King of Uganda by J H Speke, 1861- 62



Inscription on Mupundu tree, under where Livingstone's heart was buried by L P Weatherley, 1896-99

Sir Henry Bartle Frere honoured Jacob Wainright in his address in 1881 to the Royal Geographical Society:

***“Let us never forget what has been done for geography by the faithful band who restored to us all that it was in their power to bring of our lost friend, and who rescued his priceless writings and maps from destruction. The remains of Livingstone were accompanied to this country by one of these faithful Negro attendants, Jacob Wainright.”***

On his return to Africa, Wainright worked for the Church Missionary Society in Uganda until his death in April 1892.



## The Frere Town & Rabai Group: Cephas & Mark Wellington

These groups of Bombay Africans were involved in expeditions after 1881 and spent much of their life in East Africa rather than in India. Rabai in Kenya served as the base for the earliest expeditions by German explorers Rebmann and Krapf, who famously were the first Europeans to have sighted Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya respectively. The Church Missionary Society later used Frere Town and Rabai as settlements for Africans returning from India.

Little is known about the Bombay Africans involved in expeditions after 1881. However, they played an important part in the setup of these two early missionary settlements.

- **Cephas**

Cephas was born near Lake Malawi and after liberation at sea was taken to Nasik in India. He later returned to Africa and stayed at Frere Town where explorer Harry Johnston was nursed after contracting malaria. Cephas joined Harry Johnston on the Royal Geographical Society Kilimanjaro Expedition in 1884. Johnston notes:

*“Cephas – a junior cook, often called Cephasi by the soft spoken Zanzibaris, was originally a freed Nyassa slave. Educated at the Nassik Mission near Bombay, he had been taught to cook... He had visited England.”*

- **Mark Wellington**

Mark Wellington had also been taken to Nasik in India and later returned to Africa where he went to the Rabai Mission. Explorer Joseph Thomson used Rabai as a base for the Royal Geographical Society sponsored Masailand Expedition. He notes:

*“I arrived while service was being conducted by Mr. Jones, the native teacher...I set about enlisting some more porters from the Mission to make up my full compliment.”*

In 1883 Mark Wellington was described by Thomson:

*“Along with these, however, should be mentioned my cook – a Nassik boy – named Mark Wellington, well intentioned and honest...”*