

**Timing:** The Museum is open on all days except 2nd, 4th & 5th Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays from 9:00am to 5:00 p.m.

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## Indian Legal History Museum

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**SCHOMBURG CENTER  
FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE**  
The New York Public Library

# Africans in India

## A REDISCOVERY

An exhibition jointly organized by

**Gujarat National Law University,  
Gandhinagar**

&

**Indira Gandhi National Centre  
for the Arts, New Delhi**

From 10th August, 2015

to

10 September, 2015

at

**Indian Legal History Museum**

### Gujarat National Law University

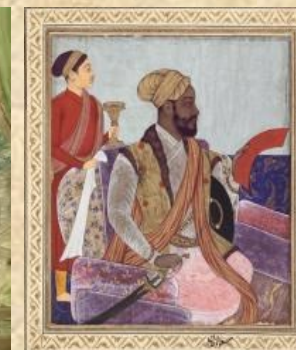
Gujarat National Law University (GNLU) is the statutory university established by the Govt. of Gujarat under the Gujarat National Law University Act, 2003. The University is functioning as nodal agency to uplift the legal education in the State of Gujarat. GNLU has come with the unique and noble idea to have a Museum on Legal History in its campus. The Museum is aiming to represent the development of civilization in India by exhibiting artifacts of legal heritage. Each change or diversion in history has been recorded in each categories given above and ultimately resulted in growth judiciary and administration of Justice it is aimed to timeline and represent this growth.

### Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) is an autonomous trust of Ministry of Culture, Government of India, which was established in the memory of Late Prime Minister of India, Smt. Indira Gandhi, in 1987, is visualised as a centre encompassing the study and experience of all the arts -- each form with its own integrity, yet within a dimension of mutual interdependence, inter relatedness with Nature, the social structure and cosmology.

### The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture located in Harlem, New York, is a research unit of The New York Public Library system. The Center consists of three connected buildings: The Schomburg Building, the Langston Hughes Building, and the Landmark Building. It is recognized as one of the leading institutions focusing exclusively on African-American, African Diaspora, and African experiences.



Curated by:

**Dr. Kenneth X. Robbins** a M.D. in Psychiatrist, Art Historian, Collector of South Asian Art and author, assembled a collection of various types of materials documenting Indian society particularly in the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century focusing on noble courts. Dr. Robbins countries of specialization is India, and his research Interest on *the Jews of India, the Indian Princes, the Nawab of Junagadh, the Jewish Community in Kolkata, Stamp money and cash coupons of the Indian Princely States and African Elites in India* and many more. The Africans in India: A Rediscovery exhibition is curated by Dr. Robbins.

**Dr. Sylviane A. Diouf** is an award-winning historian of the African Diaspora. She is the author of *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons and Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. Dr. Diouf's book *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America* (Oxford University Press) received the 2007 Wesley-Logan Prize of the American Historical Association. She is the editor of *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies* (Ohio University Press) and the co-editor of *In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience* (National Geographic). Dr. Diouf is the recipient of the Rosa Parks Award, the Dr. Betty Shabazz Achievement Award, and the Pen and Brush Achievement Award. Dr. Diouf is the Director of the Lapidus Center for the Historical Analysis of Transatlantic Slavery and a Curator at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of The New York Public Library. She has curated digital and on site exhibitions on Africans in India, African American migrations, the abolition of the slave trade, the African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean world, and the black world in the 20th century.



**African by Origin, Indian by Nationality:  
The Siddis of Gujarat**



The Siddis are an African ethnic group inhabiting India and Pakistan. They were brought to the Indian subcontinent as slaves by Arab and Portuguese merchants. Siddis are primarily Sufi Muslims although some are Hindus and others are Roman Catholic Christians. Siddis are descended from Bantu peoples from Southeast Africa. The term *siddi* is derived from the title borne by the captains of the Arab vessel that first brought *siddi* settlers to India. These captains were known as *Sayyid*. Similarly another term for Siddis is *habshi* (Abyssinia) that the ships delivered *siddi* slaves to the subcontinent, they also referred as Afro-Indians and Zanzi by the Arabs.

The first Siddis are thought to have arrived in India in 628 AD at the Bharuch port and have migrated to several places of Gujarat. Several others followed with the first Arab Islamic invasions of the subcontinent in 712 A.D. The latter group are believed to have been soldiers with Muhammad bin Qasim's Arab army, and were called *Zanjis*. While most of these migrants became Muslim and a small minority became Christian, very few became Hindu since they could not find themselves a position in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy.

*Siddis* in Gujarat :

Africans have been part of the Western state of Gujarat since at least the first century, when the town of *Barygazaor Broach* (Baruch today) was considered an

Ethiopian town, peopled by merchants from East Africa. Oral history recounted by Afro-Gujaratis mentions how their ancestors also served as bodyguards in the palaces of Hindu kings. Among their functions: to taste the Maharajah's food to protect against attempted poisoning.

The Mughals, a Muslim imperial power in Northern India from the early 16th century through the early 19th century, relied on African soldiers and sailors. In 1572, when the Mughal Emperor Akbar entered Gujarat, he was reportedly protected by 700 armed *habshi* on horseback. African soldiers and sailors also received annual payment for defending Mughal subjects from piracy at sea and attacks on land. Between the 16th and 18th centuries a *habshi* naval force was based in Surat, the principal port in Gujarat, and African sailors accompanied pilgrims to Mecca, offering protection on the high seas. Such *habshi* naval protection even predated Mughal rule. Ibn Battuta noted in the mid-14th century the legendary bravery of *habshi* soldiers and sailors. Ibn Battuta traveled with 50 Abyssinians on a ship to protect against pirate attacks; he called them "*the guarantors of safety on the Indian Ocean.*" While boarding a Chinese junk at Calicut in south India, he observed Abyssinians carrying javelins and swords and others with drums and bugles, indicating the use of Africans on ships traveling to the Far East.

Gujarati *siddis* distinguish themselves from others in India by their strong Sufi practices, mostly centering on the African pir *bava gor*, the most revered Sufi among people of African descent in South Asia. *Bava Gor*, originally named Siddi Mubarak Nob, came from East Africa during the 14th century and made Ratanpur (Bhavnagar) his home. Sidi-Sayyed, *ababshis* nobleman in the reign of Sultan Murzaffar III is arguably the most prominent *siddi* in the History of Ahmedabad. He was responsible for building the Mosque in the heart of Ahmedabad which is world famous for its unique artwork of its perforated window screens or jali of carved sandstone known as *siddi sayyed jali*. One of these jali screens is almost like a symbol of the city of Ahmedabad. Yet most Gujaratis are simply unaware that this monument of which many are so proud, was built by an African.

The lofty minars with principal archway formed part of the original mosque which was completely damaged during the upheaval of 1775 A.D. (Anglo-Maratha war). These exquisitely carved minarets are said to have been built by Sidi Bashir, a famous architect in the reign of Sultan Mahmud

Shah (1448-1511 A.D.) These minars are world famous for their shaking property known as Shaking Minaret (*jultaminar*), just behind the present Kalupur railway station, Ahmedabad which is entirely due to impressive vibrations conducted through the perfect plan of the plinth.

The African became the patron saint of the agate bead industry, having been credited for augmenting the trade in the quartz stone between East Africa, the Persian Gulf, and India. Before arriving in India, *bavagor* spent time in Mecca and the area of Basra in lower Iraq, where he studied with Sufis of the Rifa'i order, who gave him the honorific title *BavaGor* meaning "*master of deep meditation*" in Arabic.

To one oral tradition, *bavagor's* sister, Mai Misra, who developed her own Sufi following, came to India to vanquish a demoness; meanwhile, her brother vanquished the demon *Rakshisha* of Hindu mythology. This legend speaks to the historic tensions involving the coming of Islam to the Indian subcontinent and the transformation of Hindu society. Misra, whose name is derived from *misr* (Arabic for north-east Africa), is particularly venerated for her powers of fertility. Respect for her may be seen in the coconut rattles used by the *siddis* that bear her name. In Gujarat, as well as other parts of India, *siddis* play the *malunga*, a single-stringed braced musical bow, found in many East African communities (and as far away as Brazil, where it is called *berimbau*). The hand that holds the *malunga* will also hold the *maimisra* rattle below, which is attached to a gourd resonator to amplify the instrument.

Many *siddis* in Gujarat are known for performing sacred music as wandering *fakirs* (Sufi ascetics) in praise of *bavagor* and other saints. They perform *goma* (or *dbama*), a word deriving from the Swahili *ngoma* (drum and dance), in celebration of *urs*, commemorating Muslim saints, sometimes over the course of several days. They also perform at weddings and birthdays and, in previous times, at celebrations of noble courts.

Today *bavagor* shrines are located along the eastern parts of the Indian subcontinent—from the area of Sindh down to Mumbai. They are often associated with the agate trade and are visited not only by Muslims of various backgrounds but also by Zoroastrians, Christians, and Hindus. In Gujarat, the shrines were a former refuge for runaway Africans and, later, for free *siddis* looking for a space where they could congregate. One contemporary follower of *bavagor*,

*siddiasooappa*, served as caretaker of a shrine in Mumbai. Her grandfather had been recruited from East Africa into the army of the Nizam of Hyderabad, and her father, Abdul Rasak Sidi Bilal, was a singer of *qawwali* (songs of Muslim devotional praise).

While in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf Coast region African musical and dance traditions have continued in the form of spirit possession performances (*zar* and *tanburah*), in South Asia African traditions largely revolve around the veneration of Sufi pirs, such as *bavagor* in Gujarat or Shaikh Najib in the Maldives. In both areas, references to the ocean and seafaring figure prominently with lyrics from East Africa. In the Gujarati port city of Diu—where in 1838 a chronicler estimated that up to 6 percent of the population was *siddi*—many Swahili words are found in the languages spoken today by the men and women of African descent.

Surat and Sachin:

Surat is a port city situated on the banks of the Tapti river. A chief port of the Mughals but it was gradually supplanted by colonial period ports to the south of it. To the South was the Portuguese fort of Daman. Just a bit of south of Bombay was the Siddis island fort of Janjira, which lived on piracy and never conquered by any Indian or colonial power. Siddi Mansud of Surat collected a fleet and seized several ships at the mouth of the Tapti. In Janjira and Sachin kingdoms the *siddis* rose from King makers to Emperors. Janjira was under the *siddis*. Shivaji launched several attacks but the fort remains unconquerable. The modern day Sachin State was founded by the son of 18th century Nawab of Janjira. The rulers of Sachin bore the name "Nawab" granted by the Britishers. They had their own cavalry, arms, currency and stamp paper. Later on, it became part of Surat district in Bombay province.