

New Exhibit Highlights Kenyan Asians

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By Zachariah Mampilly

Some two millennia after Asians first started visiting the East African coast, the opening of a major exhibition at the National Museum of Kenya signals that they have finally arrived. "The Asian African Heritage in Kenya: Past and Present" opened last fall in Nairobi and is the first exhibit to document the 2000-year history of South Asians in Kenya.

The Asian population, which encompasses groups that came to East Africa from South Asia before the colonial era as well as more recent immigrants, is uniquely embedded in the historical and cultural realms of the region. But the relationship between Asian Africans and the region's native Africans has been fraught with longstanding resentment and mistrust.

"The exhibit is about African history, focusing on an aspect of African history that concerns the people of Asian descent," says Dr. Sultan Somjee, a fourth-generation Kenyan Asian and the exhibit's curator. Somjee goes on to describe the exhibition as focusing on "how communities perceive their identities and histories in the context of present tensions, stereotyping and general misrepresentation."

Visitors enter through a replica of a wooden dhow, the type of boat in which thousands of Asians left the coast of India to sail towards greater opportunity in East Africa. (One of many Asian contributions to regional life, dhows can still be seen along the Swahili Coast today.) Once inside the exhibit, viewers are deluged with drawings and other artifacts covering the spiritual, political, cultural and mundane aspects of these immigrants' lives.

Detailed sketches by an Asian surveyor, Mohamed Sadiq Cockar, depict rail workers camping in the trees in fear of being attacked by lions and other wild animals. The exhibition is subdivided into three categories, with an emphasis on labor, but also includes

sections on social heritage and intellectual legacy. "The exhibition's recreation of the Asian duka [store], the Gujarati kitchen and carpentry shop are so realistic and so interwoven with personal history, that one can almost feel one is living in those days," one visitor told *The East African* newspaper.

Somjee says he created the exhibit with the goal of showing the integral role Asians have played in Kenya's history. A similar impulse led to his establishment of the African Peace Museums, institutions meant to shed light on the peace traditions of established African cultures.

Although Asians have lived in East Africa for some 2000 years, they are still seen as newcomers by some of their countrymen. Few other ethnic groups have achieved such economic success, which only adds to the resentment many Kenyans feel toward the neighbors many see as a reclusive and exclusive community.

By far the largest influx of Asians came during the colonial era, when the British brought Asian laborers to help build Kenya's railroads. As indentured servants they lived hard and dangerous lives; historians estimate that for every mile of railroad built, four Asian laborers lost their lives. After finishing their terms of service, many of the immigrants chose to stay on in Kenya to work as farmers, small businessmen, and a few even as civil servants. In addition, other Asians came to work in small businesses or for the colonial government. Now the descendants of these laborers have been in Africa for four generations, and most know no other home besides Kenya.

The ethnicity of Kenyan Asians came to the fore during the dark days of the 1970's and 1980's, when the community lived in constant fear of suffering the same fate as their neighbors in Uganda who were expelled from the country during the reign of Idi Amin.

More recently, the August 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Kenya shone an uninvited spotlight upon the Kenyan Asian community, as several Kenyan Asians were killed alongside many more Kenyan Africans, and it was the civil society structures

established by the Asian community that provided respite to the thousands of victims of the bombing. Hospitals established by Asians tended to victims, while Asian businessmen had cranes loaders at the site within hours.

Although not established specifically in response to the disaster, the Nairobi exhibit does bring light to a community that has long preferred to remain socially closed to other Kenyan ethnic groups. This sense that the Asian community remains isolated and aloof seeds much of the resentment Kenyan Africans direct towards them.

"Ordinary Kenyans have said enough is enough to all forms of exploitation and plunder of the national economy by the largely cunning Asian population," said one Kenyan, "and we all know that the people's own responses are in place already to deal with, and totally eradicate, the Asian malaise in the country."

But this view is far from universal, and some Asians have formed close and tight economic, social and political bonds with Kenyan Africans. The involvement of the Asian community in building schools, hospitals and mosques for use by the general Kenyan population has left many Kenyans grateful for their presence in the country.

For many in the community the question remains whether the burden is upon them to transcend the heavily divided Kenyan ethnic landscape in order to live peacefully in their adopted home, or if non-interference in the cultural and social landscape is all that is required.

By depicting life in Kenya through the eyes of the Asian community, but without offering a glamorized or propagandistic view of relations between the two communities, the exhibit's organizers hope to correctly place the Kenyan Asian community within the Kenyan spectrum. Somjee reports an overwhelmingly positive reaction from viewers of all ethnic backgrounds, which he says proves that "the Kenyan is generally non-racial."

Perhaps the biggest goal for the Kenyan Asian population is to

simply be accepted as one more ethnic group within the Kenyan nation, and through such efforts, they are moving ever closer to that goal. According to Dr. Somjee, "I do not see resentment against Asians Africans out of the overall national context, that is, it is not any different from resentment of one tribe against another in the context of poverty, inequalities, power games, corruption and lack of pluralism." In a uniquely Kenyan way, that is progress.

About the Author

Zachariah Cherian Mampilly is a writer living in Bangalore, India.