



# Re-shaping Siddi Communities: INDIAN PAN-SIDDISM AND GLOBAL PAN-AFRICANISM

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“Siddi” is how most Indians of African descent are named and call themselves today in India. However, not all Indians of African descent are Siddi. For instance, some Christian and Hindu people of African descent in Diu do not identify as Siddi.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in Hyderabad, people of African origin may reject the term as pejorative.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the term Siddi is generally not used for very recent immigrants or visitors from Africa.<sup>3</sup> However, during my field work from 2014 to 2018, I noted that most people of African descent from Karnataka, Gujarat, and Mumbai proudly use “Siddi” to refer to themselves and to other people of African descent. As this article is mainly about them, I have chosen to use their own designation. Indeed, Siddi communities “should not be grouped together as a single community without careful qualification,” for various groups are the result of many different historical events,<sup>4</sup> as shown in this volume.

In Gujarat, Diu, Daman, and Mumbai, Siddis are spread across the area. Most cities or villages have their Siddi *jamaat* (community, Islamic

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1 Péquignot interviews 2016-2017.

2 Basu, von Schwerin and Minda 2008 page 288.

3 Curtis 2014 page 86.

4 Kenoyer and Bhan 2004 page 44.

1-2. (opposite) Siddi *goma/dhamāl* music and dance in Bava Gor shrine during Bava Gor Urs festival, Ratanpur, Gujarat.  
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council or assembly) but there is no Siddi federation at the state level. However, kinship links Siddi families in different areas from Gujarat to Mumbai, as endogamous marriages are predominant. Most Gujarati Siddis are Sunni Muslims and venerate African Sufi saints. They identify with the one jāti (community by birth), referred to as “our Siddi caste,” share the bodily signs of black skin and curly hair, as well as “a common history of crossing the sea” and being a “special community of Gujarati Muslims.”<sup>5</sup> Since most Muslim Siddis living in Mumbai “consider themselves as migrants from Gujarat,” continue to marry their children with Gujarati Siddis<sup>6</sup> and venerate the same African Saints, I include Mumbai Siddis, as well as Diu Siddis while talking about Gujarati Siddis.

In Karnataka, Siddis are mostly Christian (Catholic or Protestant), Muslim (Sufi or Tabligh), or Hindu. Completely set apart from the larger society but often exploited by landlords, the Siddi communities of this state are scattered throughout the forests, forming groups mostly of the same religion. However, religious boundaries among Siddis are not fixed, and past religious affiliations have shifted.<sup>7</sup> This is increasingly the case today, especially through interfaith marriages between Siddis and an ongoing process of unification. New empowerment strategies have been developing for more than thirty years, using the bodily features that set Siddis apart to create a *Karnatakan* Siddi community beyond religious borders. According to Charles Camara, “[p]erhaps, the major change that has taken place among the Siddis relates to the concept of *Siddiance zat*, meaning the Siddi people.”<sup>8</sup>

Another phenomenon has occurred during the last decade: the emergence of a network between Siddis of Gujarat, Mumbai and Karnataka and the attempt to create pan-Siddi federations. These networks are currently extending beyond India’s borders, as relationships are being forged between some Siddis and other people of African descent across the globe, based on a common identification with their African roots.

In this essay, I will discuss the relation between ongoing processes of unification of Siddis in India, and the development of transnational networks between Siddis and people of African descent elsewhere. After analyzing how Siddis of Gujarat and Karnataka have been shaping

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5 Basu 2008b page 169.

6 Shroff 2007 page 306.

7 Obeng 2007 page 79.

8 Camara 2004 page 113.

their communities locally, regionally and nationally, I will give some examples of emerging networks with other people of African descent, and the link they may have with some attempts at pan-Indian Siddi unification. Finally, I will analyze the echoes between certain ideologies of global Pan-Africanism and Indian pan-Siddism.

## “UNITY MAKES STRENGTH”

African people and their descendants have occupied various positions in Indian history, as this volume shows. They have developed different empowerment strategies such as creating African alliances. For instance, Pan-African military and political communities were built in India by African rulers like Malik Ambar, Dilawar or Randaula Khan and their successors, articulating their self-conscious outsider identities to redefine themselves in Indian society.<sup>9</sup> In Janjira, endogamous marriage patterns were also established to maintain a Muslim dynasty of African descent until 1948.<sup>10</sup> However, the descendants of the royal family of Siddis of Janjira today do not identify with other Siddi communities in India but as a “special lineage” for whom Siddi is a royal title.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary Siddi communities living in Gujarat and Karnataka are generally confined to the lower social ranks. In addition to their economic difficulties, Siddis from those areas are still facing a stigma due to their physical features (black skin, curly hair), associated with a certain “impurity”<sup>12</sup> that represents the lowest scale in Indian social classifications and is opposed to the popular image of the Brahmin in India.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, in Gujarat and in Karnataka, Siddis have also used their common African origins to shape their communities in order to renegotiate their place within Indian society. Although Siddis in both States deploy adaptation strategies in an effort to strengthen their position, by building a Siddi community, the means used to reach this goal are distinct.

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9 Obeng 2003 pages 106-107.

10 Curtis 2014 page 90.

11 Shroff 2007 page 317.

12 Dumont 1966 pages 168-193 ; Herrenschmidt 1996 pages 4-5.

13 Bétéille 1969 pages 276-277.

Helene Basu analyzes the links that may have developed between Africans and their descendants, arriving in Gujarat at different times and from different backgrounds. In Gujarat, Siddis venerate African-Sufi patron saints Bava Gor, his younger brother Bava Abbas, and their sister Mai Mishra.<sup>14</sup> Siddis of Gujarat identify Bava Gor as a *kulpir* (lineage saint)<sup>15</sup> and his story can be considered as the founding myth of the Siddi community in Gujarat, providing a meaning other than slavery to their migration to India. The common veneration of African saints has created links between remote Gujarati Siddi settlements. During the annual *urs* festival of Bava Gor, Siddis perform music and a ritual dance called *goma* or *dhamāl* (Figs. 1-5), specifically dedicated to their saints and related to their African origin.

According to Basu, the shrine of Bava Gor enabled former slaves to form a Siddi *fakir* brotherhood, referred to as a Sufi path (*tariqa*), that developed into a new syncretic subculture from the nineteenth century onwards.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the stigma of low status confronted by Siddis based on their physical features, is reversed into *karamat* (special power) inherited from the “ancestor saints”<sup>17</sup> which links their community with a wider field of popular Sufism, as a special Muslim caste.

Today, however, Gujarati Siddis often stress that common beliefs, music performances, and intermarriages are not enough to empower themselves and that they would need a Siddi federation at the state level to fight for political and economic benefits, like obtaining “Scheduled Tribes” (ST) status which enables them to benefit from measures of affirmative action regarding employment, education, or living conditions. In Gujarat, Siddis of Saurashtra region obtained ST status in 1956. However, Siddis in other regions of Gujarat are still fighting for it. For the Siddis of Karnataka, the ST status was one of the goals in a long fight, which began with their struggle to be recognized as “one Siddi community.”

In the 1980s, in Karnataka, certain Siddi leaders (Christian, Hindu, and Muslim) began to develop contact between Siddis of different religions in order to fight for their rights. At that time, Siddis in this region faced severe economic hardships. In 1985, the first Karnataka Siddi organization, the “All Karnataka Siddi Development Association”



14 Basu 2008b page 165.

15 Basu 2003 page 236.

16 Basu 2004 page 63.

17 Basu 2008a page 231.

- 3-4. (opposite, top) Siddi *goma/dhamāl* music and dance in Bava Gor shrine during Bava Gor Urs festival, Ratanpur, Gujarat. © Sofia Péquignot, 2017.
- 5. (opposite, bottom) Siddi women performing *goma/dhamāl* in front of Bava Gor chilla (local representation of the original tomb of the Sufi saint) during Bava Gor Urs festival, Diu. © Sofia Péquignot, 2016.



(AKSDA), was established. Cajetan Siddi, one of its founders, informed me that his community “did not exist” for the government before AKSDA was created. Siddi leaders of AKSDA, like Cajetan, visited Siddi settlements in the area to explain the need for cooperation, because “their features made them the same and they would be stronger together.”<sup>18</sup> The organization worked hard for Siddi unification, development projects, education, and petitioning the state for ST status. Several other organizations too were formed to continue the long struggle, and ST status was finally obtained by Siddis of Uttara Kannada in 2003.<sup>19</sup> The fight for ST status continues in other districts of Karnataka. According to Siddi leaders and the Director of Social Welfare in Karwar, when census officers in the past made inquiries in these districts, Siddis responded that they were Christian or Muslim. Thus, the classification of ST was not granted to those Siddis.<sup>20</sup> Understanding the importance of the unification process and gain rights as a specific community in India, Siddis had to declare “Siddi identity” before religious affiliation. Despite their effort of standing together as one community, Uttara Kannada Siddis struggled for more than eighteen years before ST status was granted.

The process of unification and the affiliation to ST category has brought benefits like basic food rations, housing or agricultural subsidies to Siddis, but primarily, it has forged a sense of unity. Being Siddi, which had negative implications in the past, has become a positive factor. Some Indians of African descent who did not formerly call themselves Siddi have changed the way they refer to themselves after gaining ST classification. In fact, many Siddis now request that their family name adopted through their Christian or Muslim faith be replaced by “Siddi” in official documents. Another consequence of this unification process is a significant increase in interfaith marriages among Siddis in the last fifteen years. Siddi leaders encourage members of their community to see themselves “as one,” beyond religious faiths, and some younger community activists and social workers married Siddi women of other religions. For example, in 2017, Mohan Siddi converted from Hinduism to Christianity in order to marry his wife. This example among others in the “Karnataka Siddi community” transcends the gender hierarchy and the religious endogamy that rules Indian society. In 2015, Mohan explained his vision of “siddism” as a means to create unity between all Karnataka, and then all Indian Siddis. According to him, being Siddi would become the first membership beyond religion and beliefs. By

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18 Péquignot interview with Cajetan Siddi May 2017.

19 Prasad 2005 page 105.

20 Péquignot interviews May 2017.

promoting Siddi “uniqueness” of “being black and having curly hair in India,” as well as the “Siddi culture” like special Siddi dances and songs, Mohan felt that he could create pride in his community, by which he believed that Siddis could now “free themselves to all kinds of domination.”<sup>21</sup>

Mohan and two other social workers, Ramnath and Jairam Siddi, who share similar views about Siddism, went to Gujarat several times. They then traveled to Maharashtra and Hyderabad, to visit other Siddis and talk about a pan-Siddi unification. Along with a Siddi from Mumbai, Mohammad Saboo Siddique, Mohan registered the first national pan-Siddi organization in 2015, called the “Siddi India Foundation.” Mohammad Saboo claimed that the primary goal of this organization was to bring all India Siddis together, and collect funds for education and economic development projects in order to improve living conditions of Indian Siddis.<sup>22</sup>

In the last few years, various online groups have attempted to connect Siddis from Gujarat, Karnataka and Mumbai, especially on WhatsApp and Facebook, where a lot of information about Siddis and other African descended people is shared. Furthermore, personal contact between Siddis of Gujarat and Karnataka has increased through the use of social media. An example of this is a “virtual love story” between a Christian Siddi woman from Karnataka, and a Muslim Siddi man from Mumbai, originally from Gujarat. The couple met while commenting on a Siddi *goma* photograph posted in a Siddi Facebook group. They corresponded privately for several months and decided to marry; their union was celebrated in 2016. I met the couple in Ahmedabad in 2017, while she was pregnant with their first child. They both agreed that religion was not important for them; they chose each other “because they were both Siddis.”

Although many Siddis want to develop a pan-Siddi group at the national level, they still confront several issues, particularly religious differences and geographic distances separating Siddi communities.

It is noteworthy that both in Gujarat and Karnataka, Siddis have used their African origins as the foundation to build their community at the local and regional levels, under the rubric “unity makes strength,” particularly in an Indian society overdetermined by group membership. However, the nature of the link is distinct in the two areas. While Gujarati and Mumbai Siddis are linked through marriage, kinship links, the shared veneration of African saints, ritual celebrations and

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21 Péquignot interview with Mohan Siddi March 2015.

22 Péquignot interviews with Mohammad Saboo Siddique April 2016 and July 2017.



music practices of *Siddi goma*, Karnataka Siddis from different religious backgrounds only began to unite some decades ago, to be recognized by the state as “one community” and to fight for their rights.

For a few years now, various attempts to develop a Siddi federation at the national level have been made. Obeng notes that some educated Karnataka Siddis “have begun to address their Siddiness, which underscores their difference in India. This focus has made some of them examine issues about their African roots.”<sup>23</sup> Not only in Karnataka, but also in Mumbai and Gujarat, interest in other African descended people throughout the world has developed in the last decades. Additionally, people and organizations of African descendants from different countries have begun exploring the presence of “Africans” in India and have been inspired to initiate various projects with Siddis.

## SIDDIS AND AFROGLOBAL NETWORKING

While some Gujarati Siddis are aware of their families’ and ancestors’ connection to Africa, many Siddis were not aware of their African roots until recently. However, their “host society” has always reminded Siddis of their “foreignness,” embodied in their “particular” phenotype that associates them with the lower scales of the Indian classification system, making them “resident aliens, or inside outsiders, since medieval times.”<sup>24</sup>

Many Siddis in Karnataka discovered their African roots only a few decades ago, when for instance, they saw people “like them” on the television, which provided a new meaning for their existence in India. When Barack Obama was elected President of the United States, Siddis in Karnataka held celebrations. One of their leaders, Diyog Siddi, reached out to the American President, wanting to give him a pot of forest honey. In the letter of congratulations, Diyog most importantly informed Obama of the existence of the Siddis in India. This story gained attention and was published in newspapers, even providing the basis for an upcoming film.

Compared to Diyog’s generation, the media savvy younger generation associates more with a Pan African “identity” through *Rastafari* clothes, accessories, African, African American and West Indian music, which have become increasingly popular among them.

6. (opposite, top) Siddi leader Diyog Siddi showing me a local newspaper article from February, 2013, talking about the congratulation letter he wrote to President Obama.  
© Sofia Péquignot, 2014.
7. (opposite, bottom left) A Siddi young man in front of the Parsi Bava Gor chilla wearing a Bob Marley jacket with cannabis leaf, Mumbai, Maharashtra.  
© Beheroze Shroff, 2018.
8. (opposite, bottom right) Siddi young men dancing to DJ music (African, African American and West Indian music) during a wedding, Dodkop, Karnataka.  
© Sofia Péquignot, 2017.

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23 Obeng 2011 page 15.

24 Drewal 2004 page 146.



Belgaum & Uttara Kannada

is 'African' bond

## Siddis write to US Prez Obama

They hope that their congratulation letter reaches White House

**KARWAR:** When Barack Obama was sworn in as the President of United States of America for the second term on January 20, the Siddi tribe held glorious celebrations in Haliyal town. Cultural programmes were organised and they exchanged greetings with each other.

But a few may be surprised thinking about the relation between Siddi tribe concentrated in Uttara Kannada region of Karnataka and US President Barack Obama. It is interesting to note that one factor which connects Siddis and Obama is their 'African' origin. The Siddis held the celebrations to express their happiness for an African man who reached the top position in USA.

Way back in 2009, when Obama was elected as US President for the first time, the Siddis planned to send honey to Mr Obama as a token of their love and respect. They appealed the district administration to grant permission to send the honey to White House. But the district administration which initially provided assurances said that eatables could not be sent to the White House. This made the Siddis unhappy. Also, none of the members of Siddi tribe were educationally and economically able to fly to America and present honey to Mr Obama. Hence, their dream remained unfulfilled.

**'Congrats Mr Obama'**


However, Obama getting elected as US President for the second term has made the Siddis happy. This time, they have decided to send a congratulation letter to the US President. The letter addressed to Mr Obama reads: "Congratulations for having taking charge as US President for the second term. We (Siddis) who basically hail from Africa are residing in Karnataka since 400 years. Portuguese, Britishers and Arabians brought us to Karnataka as slaves. Post Indian independence, Siddis settled in the forest area. The Siddis who have adopted Hinduism, Islam and Christianity were accorded tribal status by Union Government of India in 2003".

In the letter, the Siddis have appealed Mr. Obama to visit Haliyal, atleast for a day, during his visit to India.

The Siddis are all set to send the letter to the White House through The American Embassy located at Chanakya-puri in New Delhi. American Centre located on Kasturba Road and American Consulate located at Anna Salai in Chennai.

"We are proud that a man of African origin is heading USA. During the first term of Obama, we hoped to send honey to him but did not succeed. But this time, we are planning to send greetings to him. The Indian government should co-operate for this", said Siddi community leader Diyog Siddi.

**DH News Service**



**Siddi leader Diyog Siddi**





In 2015, I attended a protest in Karnataka against the imprisonment of around two hundred Siddis who had allegedly “illegally” cut down trees in the forest. Siddis of all religions attended the protest carrying banners, and claimed that the forest was historically their own land. One of the banners depicted Nelson Mandela and an African child, both of them with fists raised in defiance. The background representing the forest carried the name of a local Siddi organization with the slogan: “My voice should count. Respect it!” During the protest, the Siddi drum called *dammam*,<sup>25</sup> was played to represent Siddi unity and uniqueness in Karnataka. The protesters also carried a portrait of Dr. Ambedkar, to represent an affiliation with the *Dalit* movement in India. The symbols that combine the claims of Siddis as Scheduled Tribe, African descendants and Dalits indicate some ways in which Siddis have begun to identify with other “Africans” and oppressed groups, even as they are appropriating and reworking their own Africanness. Awareness of the global presence of “Africans” has created new avenues of identification and aspirations, both on the national and international levels.

Prita Sandy Meier highlights the ways in which Siddis of Gujarat have been encouraged to emphasize their “Africanity,” albeit in an exotic way, by government programs promoting “multiculturalism of India,” as well as by scholars’ recent interest in the African diaspora in the Indian Ocean and the Africanness of Siddis.<sup>26</sup> For example, ethnomusicologist Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy collaborated with a Siddi *goma* group from Gujarat to record a Siddi CD and organized the “first Sidi tour outside India” in 2002.<sup>27</sup>

In 2000, Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Edward Alpers, along with other scholars, organized an international conference, *Sidis at the Millennium: History, Culture, and Development*, in Rajpipla, Gujarat. Foreign and Indian researchers and about three hundred Siddis from Gujarat, Karnataka and Mumbai were in attendance.<sup>28</sup> In 2006, another international conference held in Goa, organized by “The African Diaspora in Asia” (TADIA), gathered international scholars as well as representatives from African-Indian communities.<sup>29</sup> Although further contacts between Siddis at the national level did not emerge from these conferences, Siddi representatives from all over India established an initial contact.

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 25 *Dammam* is the name of the drum as well as the dance and songs performed by Siddi men and women from all religions in Karnataka.

26 Meier 2004 pages 93-94.

27 Catlin-Jairazbhoy 2004 pages 178-202.

28 Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers 2004 page 3.

29 van Kessel 2006 page 461.

9. (opposite, top) Banner made by Siddi leaders for the protest, depicting Nelson Mandela and an African child, Bhagavati, Karnataka.  
© Sofia Péquignot, 2015.
10. (opposite, center) Siddi Protest: Nelson Mandela’s banner (back right), a Siddi man carrying a *dammam* (front right), a Siddi woman carrying the portrait of Dr. Ambedkar (front middle), and Manvel Desouza Siddi, human rights activist and social worker leading the protest (front left), Bhagavati, Karnataka.  
© Sofia Péquignot, 2015.
11. (opposite, bottom) Three Siddi social workers and leaders: Jannat, a Muslim Siddi woman and two Siddi men, Hindu and Christian, Ramnath and Manvel, playing the *dammam* together in order to protest in front of the Panchayat, Bhagavati, Karnataka.  
© Sofia Péquignot, 2015.

At the international level, Gujarati Siddi *goma* groups performed in different countries of Africa. One member of a Siddi *goma* group that performed in Zanzibar in 2004, stated that an African elder who witnessed the Siddi *goma* began to weep and asked the Siddi performer: “how can you save your culture from seven hundred years?” This Siddi man was married to a non-Siddi woman but his visit to Africa made him ambivalent about Siddis marrying outside their community:

From my side, don't marry out of caste. It is not about religion or anything, but I want to save my community. ... Before, if you married outside, you had to come out of the caste ... It is good to mix but I think that after fifty years of out-caste marriages, Siddi will be finished!<sup>30</sup>

In many areas of Gujarat and Karnataka, Siddis are posing a similar question about marrying children with non-Siddis, because “Siddi identity,” embodied by certain features from ancestors is seen as “difference” and a source of pride. In Gujarat, when I asked one of my first informants, a sixty-five-year-old man, what “made” a Siddi, he told me: “first the hair, then the lips and then the nose.” Another thirty year-old Siddi man bemoaned his grandfather’s marriage to a non-Siddi woman:

I feel bad because I lost my genetic ... I have no curly hair and I have no brown skin and I'm not looking as a Siddi. But I am Siddi! ... [People] easily identify who is the black people. It is maybe like ... the extraordinary!<sup>31</sup>

The identification of Siddis with a community of African descendants is not a one-way process, however. A Ugandan man by the name of Bosco Kaweesi, who came to India as a student in 1995, became aware of the presence of Siddis in the forests of Uttara Kannada and began working on the education of young Siddis. Being a social worker and a member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, he requested some of the church organizations to sponsor the education of Siddi children in Adventist schools. In 2005, the mostly African-American group NAPS (The National Association for Prevention of Starvation),<sup>32</sup> connected to the Seventh Day Adventist Church, traveled to Karnataka for missionary work. They offered to sponsor Siddi children with the objective that young generations of Siddis educated in Adventist schools would assist

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30 Péquignot interview April 2014.

31 Péquignot interview March 2014.

32 <https://www.napsoc.org/>.



in their evangelical mission. One of the young English-educated Siddis selected as a representative of NAPS in India, went to South Africa for the first time to participate in an international meeting of this association.

The majority of educated Siddis of Karnataka who speak fluent English today have received at least part of their education in Adventist schools. Some of them have been able to use their linguistic skills to forge links between foreign scholars, photographers, journalists, missionaries, NGOs, and their own communities.

Pashington Obeng, a Ghanaian American scholar who has published extensively on Siddis of Karnataka, has also opened up transnational connections for Siddis. At the request of a South African colleague, Obeng facilitated the participation of three Siddi men at the 8<sup>th</sup> Pan-African Congress, in Johannesburg, organized around the theme “Mobilizing Global Africans, for Renaissance of Unity.” Thus, in 2014, the three Siddis Mohan, Jairam and Ramnath traveled to South Africa to represent Siddis of Karnataka at this Congress.<sup>33</sup> Then, the South African academic himself visited Siddis in Karnataka and encouraged Mohan, Ramnath and Jairam to travel to Gujarat, Hyderabad and Maharashtra, to plan a pan-Siddi project on a national level.

12. NAPS’ missionaries welcoming ceremony among Siddis taking place in a Seventh-Day Adventist school built for Siddis children, Gadgera, Karnataka. © Sofia Péquignot, 2015.

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 33 <https://www.ituc-africa.org/8TH-PAN-AFRICAN-CONGRESS-CALLS-FOR.html>



A few months after the 8<sup>th</sup> Pan-African Congress, Mohan went on to London to participate in a conference organized by the UK Global African Congress (GACuk),<sup>34</sup> on the question of “Reparations.”

In London, Mohan linked up with Haja Nana Salifu Dagarti, a German of Ghanian descent, Pan-Africanist, humanitarian, agriculturist and human rights activist. Also the founder of the Salifu Dagarti Foundation,<sup>35</sup> affiliated with the GACuk, Haja traveled to India in 2016 and 2017 to learn about Siddis and to develop different projects. She enlightened Siddis on issues such as their interconnected global histories of migration and African unity, education, sports training, agriculture, employment and human rights for Siddis. Inspired by Haja, some Siddis joined her organization in order to assist her with her projects.

During an interview in 2017, Haja explained her conception of being “African.” She said that everywhere in the world, African-descended minorities have been set apart by their home countries as “Africans,” not as “one of them.” Haja stressed that those “Africans” should stand proud and reverse stigma into strength, through self-pride and unity.

At her request, I linked Haja to Siddis in Gujarat, like Rafikbhai, a community social worker in Jamnagar. Rafikbhai was eager to meet a person of African descent from another part of the world, particularly someone enthusiastic about the empowerment of Siddis. Accompanied by Samuel Siddi from Karnataka, Haja met Rafikbhai in Gujarat. They had productive meetings in 2018 and exchanged information on subjects of mutual interest like education, social and economic development, and Scheduled Tribes status, among others.

Another Siddi network, based on shared African roots, is currently in the developing stages. A member of the black Hebrew Israelite group



13. Banner for 8th Pan-African Congress, Johannesburg, 2014.

34 <https://www.gacuk.org.uk/>

35 <http://www.salifudagarti.org>

*Masharah Yasharah* visited Siddis in Karnataka and Gujarat. His explicit aim was to convert people of African descent worldwide to his religion. His “mission” with Siddi people is posted on Facebook, from which the following excerpt is taken:

The Siddi people Yasharahla are our brothers and sisters that came here in slavery. ... I want to make the clarification that the people here are not native Indians, they are the same people that came into America, Brazil in slavery, ... our people had a religion, before Islam, before Christianity, before Hinduism, we had our own religion that started when Moussa or Moses and the commandments ... we have to return back to our own native culture, religion that we got from Yahawah.<sup>36</sup>

In Karnataka, many Siddis give more importance to the assistance they receive by missionaries than to their religious ideology. Even though they need the support, they have an ambiguous relationship with their own clergy, which has exploited and mistreated them, demonstrating open racism and social discrimination. Thus, the member of the black Hebrew Israelite group received some attention about his missionary work with Karnataka Siddis. This was not the case for Gujarati Siddis, as Islam is of great importance to their own understanding of Siddi identity, as analyzed by Basu, Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Shroff. Even though Siddis of Gujarat attach great importance to meeting with African descendants from different parts of the world and gaining their support, they have built their own narrative of community in India through Sufi Islam. A Gujarati Siddi elder explained that he agreed to help the visitor in travels through Gujarat, but refused to discuss any religious issues, as Islam and African Sufi saints were too important for his community in Gujarat.

But reciprocal identification does not only occur with missionary, charity or political purposes, as the following example indicates. Energized by a radio program on Siddis, Amadou Dembele Mali Bandaigara, a Malian traveler living in France, embarked on a journey in India, in January 2018, to learn about Siddis. His first visit was to Gujarat. Interestingly, as a French scholar, already known to Siddis in Gujarat, I became a conduit for Amadou. Gujarati Siddis connected me with Amadou, and I connected him with Karnataka Siddis. Amadou explained that he travels to different parts of the world to meet people of African descent since he views them as his “own family” and wants to discover

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<sup>36</sup> Facebook video October 2017.





people of Mandika (*Mandigues*) origins, like himself. Siddis in Gujarat happily shared their music, dance, food and festivities with Amadou. Additionally, they exchanged information about Islam and African history.<sup>37</sup> Then, Amadou met Siddis in Karnataka and shared daily life with Siddi families. In Mumbai, too, he had rewarding conversations with Siddis. When I later met Amadou in Paris, he was eager to collaborate on Global African diasporic projects, to support Siddis and generate greater awareness of Siddis globally.

These examples of networking between Siddis and other people of African descent show “how diaspora consciousness can be ‘discontinued’ and at another historical moment, ‘remembered’ again.”<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Nagaraj, a twenty-six-year-old Siddi from Uttara Kannada, learned English in a Seventh Day Adventist school. In 2017, he created a WhatsApp group called “Say it loud, I am black.” This group includes Siddis from Karnataka, Gujarat and one Sheedi from Pakistan. The objective of Nagaraj’s Pan-Siddi online federation is mainly to empower

14. Amadou Dembele Mali  
Bandaigara (front right), with  
a Siddi family from Gardoli,  
Karnataka.  
© Amadou Dembele Mali  
Bandaigara, 2018.

37 Communication with Siddis Rafik Vajugda (Jamnagar) and Shanawaz Makwa (Diu).

38 Meier 2004 page 96.

the Siddis, while sharing information about jobs, acting auditions, music and dance performance opportunities, and knowledge about famous Africans and African descendants, contemporary and historical.

[W]herever we go in Karnataka, people tell us ‘Africa.’ But I want to make sure that in our country we are not Africans, we were born in India! So we want to identify saying we are Indians. Thus, I thought: let’s make unity of our [Siddi] team so whatever talents we have, we can share, and do something for our society. We Africans are good at sports, good at work, good at everything! The only thing we don’t have is support ... Until we feel proud about ourselves, we can’t move up. I heard that in the USA, black people worked for all the big companies and they made those companies be in the top list today ... All the dance creations began from black people. When I became educated about all these things, I felt proud of being black, so I want to say to my people: now, be proud of being black.<sup>39</sup>

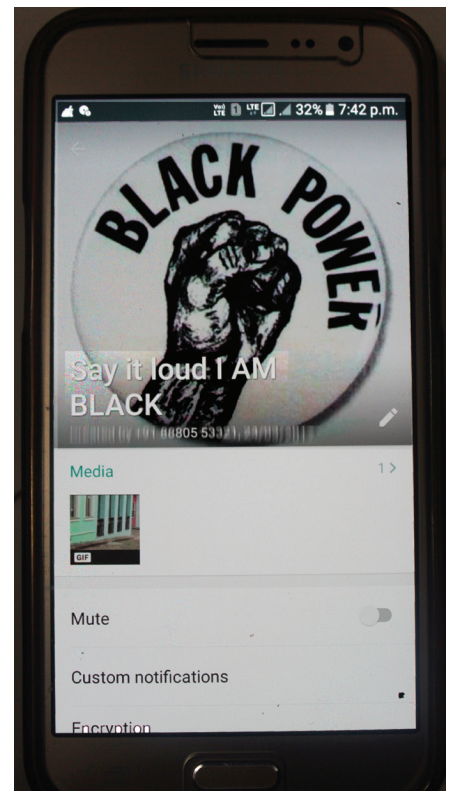
It is evident in Nagaraj’s discourse, that he wants to be considered Indian and not African in his own country, but at the same time, he wants to be proud of his origins and wishes to integrate into the global “community” of the “Africans.” I would like to emphasize that those two positions are not opposed, they are interlinked.

Nagaraj explained to me that he began to examine issues relating to blackness when he was invited by a German man onto a Facebook international group named “Hello Afro Global,” in which people discuss issues of blackness, African histories, empowerment strategies, and share documents connected to history, culture, slavery and racism. Through this group, Nagaraj discovered that Siddis had not only been slaves in India, but had also occupied royal positions. The name and profile picture for his WhatsApp group were inspired by documents shared in that Facebook group. For example, he used the logo of the Black Power movement in the United States as his WhatsApp group picture.

Nagaraj explained, however, why he did not include non-Siddis in his group:

If I take some non Siddis, what happens, you know? They will be the boss of us and start ruling us ... because non-Siddi people have the political and financial power, and everything.

.....  
39 Péquignot telephone interview with Nagaraj Siddi August 2017.



15. A mobile phone showing the profile picture of the WhatsApp group “Say it loud I AM BLACK.”  
© Sofia Péquignot, 2017.

The Pan-Africanist ideology emerged as a response to centuries of slavery, colonization, domination and segregation, while Pan-Siddism, though on a different level and at a different time, seems to follow a similar social logic. The primary goal of the Pan-African Association, during the first Pan-African Conference in 1900 in London, was to encourage the unity of Africans and their descendants in order to protect their rights, encourage respect and equality, promote education and access to higher social and political positions, and fight against racial oppression throughout the world.<sup>40</sup> The aims of the ongoing Siddi unification process are comparable, particularly in Karnataka, where unity has enabled the social empowerment of Siddis as a community. Siddi leaders have encouraged unity and pride in their *siddiness*, and now also their blackness, in order to reverse the stigma attached to it in India. By becoming aware of their African roots, and as a response to the difficulties they are facing in their own country, Siddis are “shap[ing] culture and history, just as culture and history shape them in complex ways.”<sup>41</sup>

Siddis of Karnataka, Mumbai, and Gujarat are sharing Pan-Africanist messages, ideas, and history with people in different parts of the world, and with Siddis living in other states, especially through social media.

Local and global histories and ideas are traveling, being reshaped, re-interpreted, and their mobility is creating new social constructions. Can social media be considered a modern version of the ships, to use an image developed by Paul Gilroy? Indeed, it may represent a means to conduct political dissent and a distinct mode of cultural production which articulates discontinuous histories within the wider world.<sup>42</sup> However, these ships, today are navigating beyond the routes of the “Black Atlantic.”



40 Boukari-Yabara 2014 pages 47-58 ; Sherwood 2011 pages 75-96.

41 Drewal 2004 pages 142-143.

42 Gilroy 1993 page 17.

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