

Brown men, Black women, White anxiety

Indian migration, interracial marriages and colonial categorisation in British East Africa

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Abstract

Intermarriage between Indian early migrants and indigenous women in British East Africa have never been the subject of a historical study. Built on both colonial archives and Indian sources, this article explores this little-known phenomenon and brings to light the discrepancy between the colonial administration's racial concerns and the lived experience of Indian settlers (whether former indentured labourers, merchants or civil servants). For the colonial authorities, anxious to regulate Indian intra-imperial migration, children born of these mixed unions challenged the racial categorisation on which colonial policies and control of land were built, and also indicated permanent Indian settlement in the region. In contrast, the analysis of Kenyan-Indian family stories suggests that cultural factors including religion were more influential in determining these unions' acceptability. It also appears that mixed families were in some instances able to subvert racial categorization and to circumvent segregationist measures to their social and economic advantage.

Keywords: British East Africa; Indian migration; racial identity; exogamy; mixed-race; Islam

Brown men, Black women, White anxiety: migration indienne, mariages interraciaux et classification coloniale en Afrique orientale britannique

Résumé

Les mariages mixtes entre migrants indiens and femmes autochtones en Afrique orientale britannique n'ont jamais fait l'objet d'une étude historique. À partir d'archives coloniales et de sources indiennes, cet article explore ce sujet mal connu et met en évidence la disparité existante entre les préoccupations raciales de l'administration coloniale et l'expérience vécue des premiers pionniers indiens (des anciens travailleurs engagés, des marchands et des fonctionnaires). Aux yeux des administrateurs coloniaux soucieux de réguler la migration intra-impériale indienne, les enfants nés de ces unions mixtes défiaient la classification raciale sur laquelle les politiques coloniales et le contrôle des terres étaient fondés tout en étant une preuve de l'installation permanente des Indiens dans la région. Par contraste, l'analyse d'histoires de famille kenyanes-indiennes suggère que des facteurs culturels tels que l'appartenance religieuse jouait un rôle plus important que l'identité raciale dans l'acceptation de ces unions. Il apparaît aussi que les familles mixtes pouvaient dans certains cas mettre à mal la catégorisation raciale et contourner les mesures ségrégationnistes à leur avantage.

Mots-clés : Afrique orientale britannique ; migration indienne ; identité raciale ; exogamie ; métissage ; Islam



MEHTA. Now you need a wife, a companion to anchor your home. And then children, to expand.

AMAR. You've thought of that as well!

MEHTA. I will find you a wife from India.

AMAR. No!

MEHTA. What is it, Amar? What demons does India raise in your heart?

AMAR. Our trade is married to the railway, both of us going round and round the fire of this land.

One day, I will find my bride here.

Journey to the West (Jatinder Verma)1

The first part of Jatinder Verma's theatre play *Journey to the West* (2002) depicts the history of Indian migration to British East Africa (BEA) at the turn of the twentieth century.² In this scene, Mehta, an ambitious trader, tells his protégé Amar that he would find him an Indian wife for him to make his life in the colony. The young Punjabi, who first arrived on the Kenyan coast as an indentured labourer employed in the railway, emphatically rejects Mehta's offer. He would rather marry an African woman.

From 1896 to 1903, about 40,000 indentured workers from the British Raj were sent to East Africa to build the Uganda railway connecting Mombasa to Lake Victoria.³ Eventually, a third of them remained in the region after the end of their contract.⁴ They opened shops, became artisans or petty traders, and contributed to the economic development of the Kenya and Uganda Protectorates. Indentured workers, primarily Muslim and Sikh men from Punjab, constituted the largest group of migrants. However, the region simultaneously became home to Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian free migrants who came from Gujarat, Punjab, Goa, and Mumbai. They landed on the Kenyan coast seeking to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the expanding protectorate, and by the opening up of access to the interior through the railway. They were merchants and artisans, or worked for the colonial administration as clerks, guards, and policemen.

Intimate encounters between Indian men and African women during the early days of British rule in East Africa is not a well-studied phenomenon. Yet, these interracial relationships are not only present in literary creations like Verma's play, they are also historically documented.⁵ References to these unions can be found in colonial papers as well as in Indian travel writings, and in Indian-Kenyans' family stories. While the scale of the phenomenon can hardly be measured (in early years the British administration did not record indigenous marriage and colonial demographics were incomplete), numerous references in sources suggest that interracial marriages occurred relatively frequently. Moreover, individual stories suggest that these relations were not always frowned upon by Indian and indigenous communities. This article studies the history of (marital) relations between Indian men and indigenous women from 1895, when the Kenya protectorate was established, to the years following the adoption of the Devonshire Declaration in 1923. This period was characterised by the arrival of Indian and European settlers, triggering controversy about the nature of the colony and its development. Increasing tensions arose from the fact that the White community was largely outnumbered: according to British official reports, in 1911, 13'022 Indians and Goans, and 3'157 Europeans were permanently installed, numbers that rose to 24'935 Indians and Goans for 9'792 Europeans in 1921.6 The Devonshire Paper was the result of anti-Indian sentiment, primarily fostered by White settlers, who lobbied the colonial administration to introduce stricter segregationist measures and ensure a White monopoly on the fertile highlands. Presented as a solution to the so-called 'Indian crisis' - in other words, the Indian diaspora's denunciation of unequal treatment, the absence of rights and lack of political representation in

¹ Verma Jatinder (2002), *Journey to the West*, London, Tara Arts. I am very thankful to Jatinder Verma who kindly sent me the text of his play.

² I use the term "Indian" to refer to subjects of the British Raj in general. The region of Punjab from where most indentured labourers came from is nowadays partly situated in Pakistan.

³ Aselmeyer pointed at the inconsistency (and deliberate manipulation) of figures in colonial reports. According to him by 1922, about 39'500 Indian labourers came to BEA under the indenture system (50'000 when including non-indentured railway labourers). Aselmeyer Norman (2022), "The Shadow Line. Railway and Society in Colonial East Africa, c. 1890–1914", Unpublished thesis, European University Institute, p. 34.

⁴ Aiyar Sana (2015), *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora*, Cambridge, M.A., Harvard University Press, p. 5.

⁵ Many references to intimate encounters between Indians and indigenous women in colonial Kenya can be found in fictional literature. In Vassanji's novel, for example, there is an episode during which the narrator discovers he has Maasai "blood" as his grandfather, a former indentured worker, married a Maasai woman. Vassanji M. G. (2004), *The In-between World of Vikram Lall*, Toronto, Anchor Canada.

⁶ Report on the Census of Non-Natives (1921), Nairobi, Government Printer.

Kenya – the paper was in fact a racist piece of legislation which prohibited the Indian diaspora from acquiring lands in the colony under the pretext of preserving the paramountcy of African interests.⁷

Drawing on the 1908 Sanderson Committee reports on Indian intra-imperial migration, which chronicle differing opinions amongst British officials towards unions between Indian men and East African women, I argue that even though the colonial administration did not act directly against these relationships, the offspring of these unions represented a potential challenge to the colonial order.8 Besides the fact that interracial couples resisted the colonial division of races and British divide et impera political strategy, the existence of 'mixed-race' children was disruptive, because it made visible the irreversibility of Indian settlement and challenge landownership patterns in favour of White settlers. The second part of this paper investigates Indian men's attitudes towards exogamy, using as a main source the testimonies of early Indian settlers' descendants. Collected by anthropologist Cynthia Salvadori and published in three volumes in 1996, these interviews recall the personal histories and memories of Indian "pioneers" in Kenya. Another collection focusing on the Punjabi Muslim community was published in 2010.9 Although they represent a unique set of resources, these testimonies which recount the lives of hundreds of 'ordinary people' received limited attention from scholarship and few historians have engaged with them in depth.¹⁰ Salvadori also translated two Gujarati travelogues (one Bohra and one Parsee), which are among the rare sources written by Indian entrepreneurs at that time. 11 Researching this material not only shifts the history of interracial intimacy away from White colonists' perspectives, but also reveals that Indian men's experiences were not necessarily determined by British sexual order and racial prejudices. I argue that religion was in fact the first determinant of social acceptability. The third and last section of this paper focuses on the case of Joseph Murumbi. His experience as a Goan-Maasai child shows that while race was chiefly a 'White' concern, Indian-African individuals were in some cases able to subvert racial categories and to resist colonial segregationist policies.¹² This paper is part of ongoing PhD research which deals with the history of cross-cultural intimate encounters between 'racially-defined' groups and investigates the impact of Indian migration in the shaping of gender and racial dynamics in the early decades of the British rule in Kenya.

Studies on South Asian diasporas in Africa are rarely part of national histories of South Asian, nor of African countries. In 1969, Mangat published the first well-documented overview of the social organisation and political development of the Indian diaspora in BEA. Published in 1971, Gregory's book focused on Indian-British relations and showed the ambiguous social position held by Indians in BEA, but does not really consider their social connections with African populations.¹³ Yet, since colonial historiography has recently allowed more space to non-European perspectives, the lives of indentured workers in British empire has become an object of research.¹⁴ In addition, areas-studies scholarship on the Indian Ocean has been increasingly attentive to indigenous connections, and to the positions Indians occupied in overseas colonies.¹⁵ As regards the specific case of Kenyan history, Aiyar's book recently offers an insightful picture of Indian

⁷ Aiyar S. (2015), Indians in Kenya..., *op. cit.*, p. 107. See also Gregory Robert G. (1971), *India and East Africa: A History of Race Relations within the British Empire*, 1890-1939, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 249.

⁸ British Library (BL), Indian Office Records (IOR)L/PARL/2/372, Report of the Committee on Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies and Protectorates, 3 Parts, June 1910.

⁹ Salvadori Cynthia (1996), We Came in Dhows, 3 vols, Nairobi, Paperchase Kenya Ltd; Salvadori C. (2010), Settling in a Strange Land: Stories of Punjabi Muslim Pioneers in Kenya, Nairobi, Park Road Mosque Trust.

¹⁰ See for example Kassam Aneesa (2008), "A man of principle: the life-history of an early Kenyan Indian settler (1892-1988)", *Outre-mers*, 95(360-361), pp. 63-90. Wilson Chris, (2019) "Dressing the Diaspora: Dress Practices among East African Indians, circa 1895–1939", *Modern Asian Studies*, 53(2), pp. 660-689.

¹¹ Aldrick Judy and Salvadori Cynthia (1997), Two Indian Travellers: East Africa, 1902-1905, Mombasa, Friends of Fort Jesus.

¹² I intentionally capitalise "White" to make visible that the notion refers to constructed racial identities rather than colours in the same way that "Indian" or "Asian" refer to ethnic groups.

¹³ Mangat Jagjit Singh (1969), *The History of Asians in East Africa c. 1886 to 1945*, Oxford, Clarendon Press. Gregory R. G., India and East Africa..., op.cit.

¹⁴ Carter Marina (1996), Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire, London/ New York, Leicester University Press; Desai Ashwin and Vahed Goolam (2010), Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story, 1860-1914, Cape Town, HSRC Press.

¹⁵ Metcalf Thomas R. (2007), *Imperial Connections India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920*, Berkeley, University of California Press; Alpers Edward A. (2009), *East Africa and the Indian Ocean*, Princeton, NJ, Markus Wiener Publishers; Hawley John C. Hawley (2008), *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

migrants' experiences and interestingly touches on Indian colonizing ambitions. ¹⁶ Nevertheless, few of these studies reflect on gender dynamics, and the issue of interracial intimacy is rarely mentioned.

The last few decades have witnessed historical research into the management of sexuality in the colonies. It shows that the intersection of gender and race was a particular feature of imperial policies. However, most studies focus on relations between White (male) colonists and indigenous women, and the question of interracial intimacy between other groups remains under-studied. Few scholars touched on Indian men's relations with East African women. In his ethnography published in 1972, Bharati insisted on the endogamous attitude of Indian communities in East Africa and claimed that marriages outside one's caste and religion was rather marginal. More recently, Adam's study on Indian communities in contemporary East Africa shows that Indian communities nowadays continue to follow endogamic principles, and that unions with Africans remain rare (and limited to the Muslim Sunni minority or to an 'internationalised' and highly educated youth). While these observations are likely to reflect the post-independence situation, the demographic swift within the diaspora, and the dramatic changes of political context that occurred over the century, does not justify assumptions about a mere continuity of marriage patterns. In contrast, in her generative work on prostitution in colonial Nairobi, White stated that Indian early migrants not only made use of indigenous women's sexual services, but also that, like White male colonists (especially administrators), they sometimes engaged in more or less formal relationships with local women.

Indian male migration and colonial racialism

In the early days of the protectorate, Indian migration to BEA included almost no women. Indentured workers were mostly single, or left their wives at home, while pioneer traders, if married, tended to bring their wives only after having successfully settled their business. Unlike plantation work in other overseas British territories, the building of the Uganda Railway was considered a man's job and thus no female workers were required. In fact, the presence of Indian male labourers was initially conceived as a temporary arrangement. Yet, the settlement of thousands of Indian men at the end of their indenture raised questions about the absence of women.

Data on sex ratios within non-European communities are scarce. Although the absence of Indian women was broadly acknowledged, few estimates are available for the period, and these do not differentiate former indentured workers from traders and civil servants. A census conducted in 1911 in Nairobi stated that 80% of the 2422 Indian and Goan adult inhabitants were men. What's more, the report indicated that children were apparently more numerous than women: when they are included, the community was composed of 61% men, 24% children and 15% women. While the high numbers of children implied a durable settlement, it is not possible to determine whether they were all born from Indian women. In 1921, the report on the census on 'non-natives' estimates that between 1911 and 1921 the 'Asiatic' population across the colony more than doubled. However, the percentage of women (in this case estimated at 32%) remained stable. Moreover, in the same report, the record of immigration indicated that in both 1921 and 1922 more

¹⁶ Aiyar S., Indians in Kenya..., *op. cit.* See also Greenwood Anna and Topiwala Harshad (2015), *Indian Doctors in Kenya*, 1895–1940: The Forgotten History, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁷ Sinha Mrinalini (1995), Colonial Masculinity the 'manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century, Manchester, Manchester University Press; Stoler Ann Laura (2002), Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule, Berkeley, University of California Press; Levine Philippa (2003), Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire, New York, Routledge; Heath Deana (2010), Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia, New York, Cambridge University Press; Stephen Legg (2014), Prostitution and the Ends of Empire: Scale, Governmentalities and Interwar India, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

¹⁸ Bharati Swami Agehananda (1972), *The Asians in East Africa: Jayhind and Uhuru*, Chicago, Nelson-Hall Company. The Indian diasporic community described by Bharati were at that time dominated by Gujarati and Kutchi Hindus while Indian early settlers were predominantly Muslims.

¹⁹ Adam Michel (2015), "Family, Family Life and Marriage among Indian Communities in East Africa", in M. Adam (ed.), *Indian Africa: Minorities of Indian-Pakistani Origin in Eastern Africa*, Nairobi, Africae, pp. 177-205.

²⁰ White Luise (1990), *The Comforts of Home Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press. On a different context, see Brennan's study on Tanzania in which he links African men's changing attitude towards interracial unions to the raise of racial and national consciousness in the 1940s. Brennan James R. (2012), *Taifa: Making Nation and Race in Urban Tanzania*, Athens, Ohio University Press.

²¹ Kenya National Archives (KNA), DC/NBI 1/1/1, Political records Nairobi district, 1910-1911.

than 81% of Indian migrants were men.²² Although, these figures denote some inconsistency – colonial administrators generally recognised a certain lack of accuracy due to issues in the collection of data – these estimates still attested that the Indian diaspora was highly dominated by men.²³

In 1908, the gender imbalance within the Indian diaspora was discussed in Parliament. Lord Sanderson – a senior civil servant from the Foreign Office – was instructed to investigate "the general question of emigration from India to the crown colonies as affecting India [and] the colonies concerned²⁴". A large number of interviews were conducted with different actors from each colony including Governors, Railway managers, European settlers, and travellers. Yet, no Indians and Africans were surveyed, and the minutes of the Sanderson committee reveal more about British colonists' attitudes towards gender, sexuality and race than about the social reality of Indian-African encounters.

Harry A. F. Currie, General Manager of the East African Railway testified that upon promotion, Indian labourers under his supervision sometimes "[got] hold of Swahili wives²⁵". For him, these relations were a direct consequence of the absence of Indian women, but he also believed that Indian workers did not necessarily want to live differently. "As far as I am aware, they have never expressed any inclination, when they come over for a three-year job to bring their women, and I should say – I have never tried it – that if they were allowed to bring their women they would not do it²⁶." The matter of Indian men's celibate life caught the attention of the committee, who systematically investigated this matter in the dozen subsequent interviews. It appeared that administrators on the ground were generally aware that indentured Indians engaged in intimate relations with indigenous women. Arthur Marsden, Emigration Agent in Calcutta and former Chief of Customs in East Africa, described railway labourers as a "bad class of people" who "gave a considerable amount of trouble when the railway was under construction." The committee then asked: "No women came with those on the railway? –No. – What was the result, did you hear? – Yes, rather disastrous²⁷." Unfortunately, Marsden did not elaborate on the matter, and it is unclear which kind of "disaster" he was referring to, although he most likely had in mind sexual 'deviancies' or racial mixing.

Indian male sexuality was not always perceived as a source of trouble. Lieut.-Colonel J. A. L. Montgomery, Commissioner of Lands in the East Africa Protectorate, probably did not deal closely with indentured labourers. However, he did acknowledge the absence of Indian women, claiming that the situation led to "no trouble as far as one knows" but that "of course they have lived with women of the country very often²⁸." Sir John Kirk, Former Chairman of the Committee in charge of the Uganda Railway, witnessed peaceful cohabitation between Indian men and Maasai women. He explained the phenomenon by the fact that Maasai men "were very careless about their women" and that he believed no children were born from these unions thanks to the Maasai's "great facility for preventing conception, and for procuring abortion." For him, the avoidance of interbreeding was crucial.

The half-caste race between Indian and African is one of the worst mixtures there can be. [On the coast] we had what we call the *Chotora*, or a half-caste breed between the Indian and the Swahili, and those were useless physically, and morally they were bad, they were no advantage at all ... If Indians were brought over in any settlement they ought to come with their wives and families.²⁹

The various opinions expressed by members of the Sanderson committee made visible the nuances that existed in colonial racial thinking at that time. Yet, the whole discussion about interracial sexuality, although deeply-rooted in colonial prejudices, was nevertheless approached in pragmatic terms. Indeed, beyond the ideological dimension, Indian-African families represented a potential challenge to the colonial categories that underlined British imperial politics.

(Chairman) There comes this difficulty: how can you define an Indian? We will take it an Indian has remained in East Africa and he has married an African wife. Would you consider the offspring Indian? They are born in the country and one of their parents is African?

²² Report on The Census of Non-Natives, Nairobi, Printed by the Government Printer, April 24, 1921.

²³ In some instance, Arabs were counted as Indians. In Nairobi, it was also reported that in 1909 many temporary left the city to escape the census.

²⁴ BL, IOR/L/PARL/2/372, Report of the Committee..., op.cit., Part I.

²⁵ Ibid., Part II, H. A. F. Currie, April 29, 1909.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., Part II, A. Marsden, June 10, 1909.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Part II, J. A. L. Montgomery, June 21, 1909.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

- That is a legal point that I am afraid I could not answer.
- I am only talking about the practical difficulty of settling what an Indian is. It seems to me it would be very difficult, like the question about the people you admit into certain branches of the Public Service; and the difficulty of laying down what is exactly an Englishman, or a subject of the United Kingdom, is very great.
- Is any form of marriage gone through on these occasions? I suppose nothing very particular?
- I should imagine not […] There is a fair population of half-breeds growing up.
- Do you mean half-breed Indians and half-breed Africans?
- Yes.
- You mean a full-breed Indian comes back and becomes a Jemadar and he marries an African woman?
- _ Ves
- And they have children?
- Yes
- I suppose the Indian father is very fond of his children?
- _ Ves 30

What makes these minutes so striking is the obvious intellectual impasse, stymied by racial thinking. The difficulty encountered when trying to define what "an Indian" or "an Englishman" is reveals not only the social construction of such categories, but also the colonial need to establish racial classifications. To adopt Stoler's words, colonial knowledge was often characterised by the "conceptual fixity of categories and the fluidity of their content³¹". Although these relations were not the source of apparent social disturbance, the existence of 'mixed-race' children contested the supposedly natural distinction between coexisting populations. From a practical point of view, it compromised the adoption of a clear policy to control 'the' Indian as a distinct social group. In other words, British obsession with race was tied to a political imperative: assigning racial identity to individuals was crucial to determining social status as well as political and economic rights.

As a matter of fact, the migration of women correlated to the wider issue of Indians' rights to remain in BEA, especially the allegedly "bad class" of former indentured workers. If they meant to stay, British officials would rather not have them marrying locally. The fact that Indian men were apparently "fond" of their children was taken as evidence of their intention to make their lives in the colony. Hence, 'half-breed children' not only challenged colonial categorisation, but also made visible the irreversibility of Indian settlement, which represented a tangible threat for White settlers fearing competition. Indeed, although colonial administrators recognised the benefit of Indian labour and commercial networks, European settlers hoping to develop Kenya into a self-governing 'White man's country' were not willing to share their racial privileges. In the end, the whole discussion surrounding the so-called Indian question and the attempt to regulate Indian migration to East Africa made visible Britain's erratic policy for land use and labour management as well as the absence of any long-term planning of the colony.

Indian-African families' religious and cultural belonging

It is difficult to evaluate the scale of interracial unions between Indian men and African women that occurred in the early days of the protectorate, as well as the number of children born of these relations, especially since the British did not create a distinct racial category for them in colonial censuses. Unlike Anglo-Indians, who were often recorded as 'Eurasians', Indian-African offspring fell into the 'Native' or 'Asian' categories according to the circumstances of their upbringing. One of the oldest references to the phenomenon can be found in Sorabji M. Darookhanawaja's travelogue, *Andarama Rahelo Africa* (Africa in Darkness).³³ In 1902, this middle-aged Parsi man, who worked as a civil servant in Zanzibar,³⁴ left Mombasa for a long journey beyond the end of the railway to Uganda. Darookhanawaja was the product of an anglicised education, well-travelled, and believed in the benefit of British rule in East Africa. Nevertheless, he remained critical of the colonial administration, particularly regarding segregation policies. The travelogue, arguably inspired by the Victorian travel memoir genre, includes an anecdote entitled "A Punjabi's marriage with a Kavirondo girl

³⁰ BL, IOR/L/PARL/2/372 op.cit., Part II, Currie. A Jemadar refers to a former indentured worker recruited by the railway authorities as overseer.

³¹ Stoler A. L., Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power..., op.cit., p. 8.

³² For White settlers' attitude see Shadle Brett Lindsay (2015), *The Souls of White Folk: White Settlers in Kenya, 1900s-1920s*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

³³ Aldrick J. and Salvadori C, Two Indian Travellers: East Africa..., op.cit.

³⁴ The Sultanate of Zanzibar became a Protectorate in 1890 and the colonial administration heavily relied on British Indian subordinate staff.

and how it ended." The story discusses Punjabi labourers who settled in the Kisumu region after the end of their indenture contract.

The Punjabis settled here, and they found the Kavirondo tribe to be a noble tribe, and one of them decided to marry a girl from this tribe. He chose one girl and fell in love with her. He travelled in the middle of the jungle to this girl's father's hut to plead for her hand in marriage. The girl's father said that he had no objection to the Punjabi marrying this daughter, but he would have to ask permission from the elders... Seeing that the Punjabi was madly in love with the girl, in the end the father agreed on the condition that the marriage ceremony be conducted according to the Kavirondo customs!³⁵

The Punjabi man agreed on the terms, paid the required dowry and "started living happily with her" but this marriage was not well received by his fellow Punjabis, who "decided to excommunicate him from their community³⁶". Fearing social exclusion, the groom brought his wife back to her father, who was furious and refused to take the cows the Punjabi offered as compensation. The fate of the bride remains unknown.

This story in Darookhanawaja's book is a second-hand account. It is the sole narrative I encountered that suggests such unions were doomed because of rejection by the Indian diaspora. Yet, it is interesting to note that Darookhanawaja defends the Kavirondo's patriarchal order, arguing that "one woman when she marries a man never looks at or thinks of another man. It is against their tribal custom." Although for him, the anger of the bride's father was justified, he at no point condemns the Indian groom's disloyalty or the Punjabi community's intolerance, but rather praises the Kavirondos and the absence of "limits to the goodness of such a tribe³⁷". This story does not enable us to draw general conclusions and assume that indentured Punjabis inevitably rejected exogamy. In fact, the way Darookhanawaja presents the story reflects a certain tolerance towards mixed unions. He insists on the good faith of the Kavirondos, does not oppose the Indian willingness to marry outside their communities and only regrets that the marriage resulted in social conflict. As I argue later, the disallowance of the marriage could have found its origin in religious and communal belonging since the marriage followed Kavirondos' customs rather than Punjabi (presumably Muslim) rituals.

This narrative contrasts with the Sanderson Committee's concerns about racial mixing. As a high-ranking colonial employee, Darookhanawaja's writing often echoes imperial views and he clearly saw African populations as less civilised. His admiration for the Kavirondos – whom he defined as "the happiest [people] because of their customs, truthfulness and simplicity" – is tinged with paternalism, and an ambivalent idealisation of their alleged noble savagery. However, unlike British officials, Darookhanawaja neither advocated the separation of races nor was he vehemently opposed to intermarriage. It seems that his main concern was maintaining good relations between different groups living in the colony and that exogamy was problematic solely if it generated a social conflict.

The majority of Indians who came to BEA in the early days were Punjabi and Gujarati Muslims. In 1911, the religious affiliation among the diaspora was estimated at 5'939 Muslims, 3'205 Hindus, 1'136 Goans (Christian), 99 Eurasians, and 97 Parsees (Zoroastrian).³⁸ Railway labourers were predominantly Punjabis Sunnis from Lahore while Punjabi Sikhs and Hindus formed a minority within the indentured workforce. In contrast, Hindus (Arya Samajis) composed the majority of professional workers (engineers, doctors etc.). Moreover, it should be mentioned that Indian merchants from Cutch and Gujarat whose presence along East African coast pre-dated British rule were Bhattia Hindus and Muslims (from Khoja Ismailis and Bohras Shia communities) and are often considered as the ancestors of the many Gujarati Indian entrepreneurs who settled in BEA at that time.

Most references to interracial marriage found in Salvadori's oral history books involved Punjabi Muslims. For example, a man of Indian and African descent told the story of his father and his father's uncle, who settled during the early days of the protectorate. The narrator's father came to Kenya when "he was very young" to join his uncle, an "ordinary" railway labourer. He worked in Indian shops, then on lorries before becoming a bus driver for a transport firm run by Indians. He recounted the intermarriages that occurred in his family in the first decades of the century.

Our father's uncle had married a Kipsigis woman. And our father did likewise... [Our mother] became a Muslim and took a Muslim name. She was made a Muslim by the local Muslim priest, a Nubian. When our parents' first child, our

³⁵ Aldrick J. and Salvadori C., Two Indian Travellers..., op. cit., p. 134.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Gregory R. G., India and East Africa..., op. cit., p. 80.

elder sister, was born the birth certificate has the name of the Nubian priest in the place of 'Name of mother's father', and under 'Tribe' it is written that our sister is 'Indian'. As our mother had a Muslim name there is no way you can tell from the birth certificate that there is any Kipsigis blood in our family.³⁹

The interviewee explained that although his family was part of the Indian community, his mother stayed in contact with her community of origin. "We spent most of our time with our mother's relatives, we were part of the Kipsigis community as well." It was only later in the 1940s, when the family moved to Kisumu, where the children went to a Muslim School that they first encountered racial discrimination at the hands of their Indian classmates, who made fun of their mother's stretched earlobes, commonly worn by Kipsigis women. What is striking in this testimony is the importance attached to the conversion of the Kipsigis woman to Islam as a key aspect of interracial wedlock. Moreover, with the complicity of the Imam, the children were deliberately registered as Indians. The interviewee then argued: "that is the good thing about Islam, there is no discrimination of colour⁴⁰". Despite the reported mockery towards the mother's appearance, this testimony suggests relative consent by the Punjabi Muslims and Kipsigis communities in the first decades of the century. Additionally, the conversion of the mother and the registration of the children as Indians indicate that Punjabi settlers were receptive to the integration of indigenous women if they adopted Islam.

Another testimony supports this argument. Tony Khan recalls the life of his grandfather, who came from Punjab to Kenya in 1898 as a young entrepreneur from a wealthy background, became financially successful and married locally (this suggests that the practice transcended social classes).

He had an Indian wife, but she didn't have any children, so he decided to marry a local girl. ... the daughter of a local chief, Tamingin Arap Kobise. The first thing he did was to have her convert to Islam – he didn't force her, she was happy to convert.... My aunty said she was fortunate because she lived in the same house as the Indian wife who was able to teach her everything, how to wear Punjabi clothes, how to cook Punjabi food, all the Punjabi customs and rituals, and of course the religion. My Indian nani was very tolerant and the two were very close.⁴¹

The centrality of religious affiliation implies that the wife's conversion was the "first thing" to be done. Moreover, the bride was not only introduced to Muslim faith, she was also taught Punjabi habits and customs, which suggests that indigenous brides were expected to adopt a set of cultural practices among which Muslim religion played a central role. The offspring of these unions being born Muslim, they could, in the case of women, in turn marry Indian men. This was the case of the interviewee's parents who described his family's situation in the late 1920s as quite ordinary.

There were quite a lot of mixed marriages in those days, particularly between Muslim Punjabi men and African women. I'd say that 80% of the mixed marriages involved Muslim Punjabis. These marriages were very successful – I only heard of one case of divorce, between a Muslim Punjabi and a half-caste woman.⁴²

These family stories first seem at odds with Darookhanawaja's narrative previously mentioned and I argue that the reason for the social exclusion, in this case, lay in the Punjabi groom's compliance with indigenous rituals. Rather than having his bride convert to Islam and adopt Punjabi cultural codes, the "madly in love" railway labourer agreed "that the marriage ceremony be conducted according to the Kavirondo customs⁴³". There is a strong gendered element to the religious dimension of such marriage, at least from the Indian point of view, considering that a Muslim man must bring his wife to his side rather than assimilating himself to his wife's community.

According to Rehmat Khan Kherdi, who was born to Punjabi migrants in 1915, early Muslim settlers distinguished themselves from their compatriots regarding their attitude towards mixed marriages. He explained that his father came in 1898 and worked in Mombasa as a constable for the police force. He then left his job to move up-country with a former police clerk colleague, where they started to trade. While the father of the interviewee returned to India with a Punjabi wife, his colleague "married a Kipsigis girl and they had two sons and a daughter." Drawing on examples of peaceful cohabitation during the first decades of the century, Khan Kherdi, whose second wife was also a Kispigi woman, claims than Indian Muslims were particularly tolerant and open to exogamy. "Muslims don't object to intermarriage [...] It's not like Hindus.

³⁹ Salvadori C., We Came in Dhows III..., op. cit., p. 172. Kispigis, or Lubwa people are an ethnic group from the South Rift Region.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Salvadori C., Settling in a Strange Land..., op. cit., p. 199.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 200. In this context, the term 'half-cast' refers to a person born to an Indian parent and an African one.

⁴³ Aldrick J. and Salvadori C., Two Indian Travellers..., op. cit., p. 134.

I know of only one Hindu with an African wife... I can only think of one Sikh here in Kisumu... who had an African wife, long ago."44

Religious affiliation was, according to several testimonies, a determining factor in the circumstances of interracial relations between Indian men and African women. In fact, most references to intermarriages are to be found in Muslim family stories. Hindu marriage patterns did not theoretically allow exogamy. However, it seems that in some rare cases, migration trajectories led Hindu men to disregard religious taboos regarding mixed unions. Govind J. Sutaria's testimony recalls the history of the Bathia Hindus who settled across the island and port city of Lamu in the mid-late nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, the rapidly shifting socio-economic context due to British imperial expansion pushed them to seek other opportunities elsewhere. Although most Bhatias went back to India, the ones who stayed "were those who had married local women." This suggests that married men were presumably more permanently settled, and that indigenous wives could hardly be brought back to India.

Vallabhdas... had an Arab wife. Others married Mgunya women, or Bahuns or Mbarau, all people of the Lamu area. Some Bhatia men who married locally became Muslims like their wives, other remained Hindus as Vallabhdas did. Most of those who intermarried simply stayed in Lamu and passed away there.⁴⁵

Lamu was a Swahili town, long under Muslim and Arab influence and also populated with Muslim Indian traders before the establishment of British rule. The fact that Hindu men marrying Swahili women (Sunni) and sometimes converted to Islam can be interpreted as a radical escape from Hindu marriage restrictions. Given the impossibility for African women to convert to Hinduism and the greater inclusiveness of the Muslim marriage system, some settlers apparently adopted their wives' faith. According to Govind J. Sutaria's testimony, if the husband remained Hindu, the offspring of interracial unions were systematically integrated to their mother's community.

They could not be Bhatias, they could not be raised as Hindus even if the father was remaining a Hindu. The Bhatia Community members would not have accepted any children from such marriages as our community members.... None of the children became part of the Bhatia community and that's one reason there aren't any Bhatias left in Lamu. 46

Since Hindu customs promoted marriage within the same religious group and caste, those who married locally were arguably breaking away from their community of origin. Moreover, Hindu endogamy reflects a sense of ethnic purity which segregates 'mixed-race' children. In the end, the Bhatia community in Lamu disappeared not simply due to emigration, but because the offspring of these interracial unions, who were not recognised by the diaspora, always assimilated into the local population.

Hence the fate of 'mixed-race' children born to Hindu men was dissimilar from those born to a Muslim Punjabi father, whose integration among the Indian communities seems to have been primarily determined by their education and adoption of specific cultural codes. Muzzafar Khan recalled:

My mother... was half Maasai; her father was a Punjabi ... who had been working on the Railway, her mother was a Maasai... [He] raised his children like proper Punjabis, and as a result my mother spoke fluent Punjabi, dressed like a Punjabi, read the Qur'an.⁴⁷

Muzzafar Khan's father insisted that all his children, including those born from his first marriage (with another Maasai woman), would "learn Punjabi language and the customs, and religion." He explained that not all Punjabi fathers were as mindful with regard to cultural transmission. Yet, he considered that Indian communities' inclusiveness was conditional, and the adoption of cultural codes was decisive for 'mixed' children's communal belonging.

In a nutshell, various testimonies indicate that intermarriages with indigenous women in the early years of Indian settlement were not uncommon and rather tolerated among Indian Muslim communities, which represented the majority of the diaspora. Family stories suggest that the bride's conversion to Islam was a crucial element that defined the boundaries within which these relationships could be accepted. It should be noted that despite their relative openness to exogamy, Indian Muslim men defended a patriarchal order as

⁴⁴ Salvadori C., We Came in Dhows III..., op. cit., p. 171.

⁴⁵ Salvadori C., We Came in Dhows I..., *op. cit.*, p. 31. A Mgunya, or Guniah, is a general term referring to people from the coast district between Mombasa and the river Juba.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Salvadori C., Settling in a Strange Land..., op. cit., p. 200.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

indigenous women were expected to adopt their husband's communal customs and their children inherited their father's racial status. However, Indian masculine authority was not necessarily racially motivated in the sense that ethnicity was not conceived as the primary factor of social acceptability.

Murumbi's racial mobility

Despite the fact that Indian attitudes towards mixed marriages were at odds with the British administration's segregationist concerns, African-Indian families could not avoid subjection to colonial rule and its racially-defined order. However, the story of Joseph Murumbi reveals that in some cases 'mixed-raced' offspring were able to resist colonial categories and subvert segregation. Murumbi is a prominent political figure in the history of Kenya's anti-colonial struggle. He became, after independence in 1963, Minister of Foreign Affairs and, briefly, Vice-President in 1966. He was born to a Goan merchant father and a Maasai mother in 1911. His father, Peter Zuzarte, came to East Africa in 1897 to work as a clerk. Goans, though Portuguese subjects, were often employed by the British administration, who regarded them as a superior Indian class due to Portuguese cultural influence and their early adoption of Christianity. Zuzarte left his job after some time and opened a shop in the West Kenyan town of Eldama Ravine, where the British had established a station. There, he met Murumbi's mother, who was the daughter of a Maasai chief, Murumbi, whose name Joseph would later adopt⁴⁹.

Murumbi's biography is essentially built on interviews conducted in the 1970s by the researcher and archivist Anne Thurston, 50 in which he recalled the first years of his life. He explained that his father's shop "was situated in an area reserved for European shops, away from the main Indian trade area 51" and provided essential goods to British officials and settlers. Growing up in the 1910s, Murumbi spoke English with his parents. His mother wore Western clothes at that time while his father certainly adopted the jacket and tie, as did most Goan merchants. She would go back to her Maasai dress later in life, after having separated from Murumbi's father and returned to live with her community of origin.

In Murumbi's childhood recollections, his parents' marriage is never presented as exceptional or socially disruptive. It seems that each of them maintained close relations with their respective communities. Although his shop was geographically isolated, Murumbi's father was in contact with Indian merchants who "used to come to [his] house and he used to visit theirs⁵²". Murumbi also remembered going with his mother to a large Nandi and Maasai settlement in Kedawa, not far from where they lived where he nostalgically recalled eating roasted ribs during Maasai feasts. The point here is that in Murumbi's autobiographical narrative of his early years the question of racial identity remains absent.

One might take into account that, telling the story in the 1970s, at a time when anti-Indian sentiment in Kenya was the source of violent confrontation, the political leader's memory may have been influenced by his desire to promote social cohesion and inter-ethnic tolerance. Still, it remains the case that a Goan merchant union with a Maasai women was not a factor of social exclusion in the 1910s. Unfortunately, Murumbi did not provide additional details on the circumstances of his parents' meeting and the nature of their marriage, and the modalities of the wedlock remain unknown. Yet it is likely that his father provided the appropriate dowry required by Maasai customs and that a Christian marriage ceremony took place as well.

Whatever his parent's marital arrangement was, young Murumbi did not apparently encounter social discrimination before arriving in Southern India at the age of seven, to be educated by Jesuits in a school of Anglo-Indians students. He recalled that "being an African I was rather a curiosity, and the students all came around to examine me⁵³". Murumbi claimed that he became politically conscious during his youth in India, not because he encountered racial prejudice, but from coming across Indian caste organisation. "I didn't really understand the system at all, but when I shook hands with the lower caste Hindus or brought them

⁴⁹ Joseph Murumbi did not specify his mother's first name.

⁵⁰ Anne Thurston published an extensive biography of Joseph Murumbi. Karen Rothmyer re-arranged this material which she reedited with additional contextual elements. Thurston Anne (2015), *A Path Not Taken: The Story of Joseph Murumbi, Africa's Greatest Private Cultural Collector and Kenya's Second Vice-President*, Nairobi, Franciscan Kolbe Press; Karen Rothmyer (2018), *Joseph Murumbi: A Legacy of Integrity*, Nairobi: Zand Graphics.

⁵¹ Thurston Anne (1979), "The Formation of a Character: An Interview with Joseph Murumbi", *Kenya Past and Present*, 10(1), p. 18. ⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

water from a well, I was told by the higher caste Hindus that this was wrong. [...] This was the beginning of my political conscience⁵⁴." This episode mirrors Gandhi's famous political awakening in South Africa, where he was refused access to a First-class coach in a train and asked to sit with 'coloured' people although he had purchased the appropriate ticket. Like the Indian lawyer few decades earlier, it is the unexpected realisation of class and racial injustice in another part of the British empire that triggered Murumbi's political awareness. The discrimination encountered by Gandhi and Murumbi were not of the same nature, but it is significant that in both cases, migration across the Indian Ocean, favoured by British imperial policies, played an essential role in shaping the political views of future anti-colonial leaders.

In 1931, Murumbi came back to Kenya after thirteen years away from his parents, who had separated in the meantime. Despite having paid for his education and travel costs, his father encouraged Murumbi to make his life as a Maasai.

His advice was very sound. He said, 'Now, my son, you have to come back, and I can get you a good job. But I don't want you to get a job. I want you to get some land in Maasai, identify yourself with the Maasai, your mother's people. You are educated and they need you more than my people, the Asians.' He said that when I had made some money I should go to England, study law, and come back and help my people.⁵⁵

Regardless of the romanticised narrative of his father's foresight and selflessness, Murumbi still strived to be registered as a Maasai by the British administration.

I had a big struggle to get the Government to recognize me as an African. When I applied for land, the Government officials were very suspicious. The Provincial Commissioner, Mr Hodge, said, 'Look here, you're not a Maasai, you're an Asian.' And in that respect, he was right; one takes the nationality of one's father. I said, 'That's true, but I don't want to be known as an Asian. I'm willing to renounce my Asian nationality.' Then he referred my case to the Attorney-General, and the Attorney-General ruled that I had the option either to stick to my Asian nationality and give up any rights as an African, or vice-versa.

I went back to Hodge and said that I wanted to be considered an African, and I signed a declaration to say that I had no claim at all to any rights and privileges of the Asian community. I've never changed in this decision or regretted it. ⁵⁶

The political context in the early 1930s was significantly different from the time of Murumbi's birth, given the rise of anti-Indian sentiment and the segregation policy of the interwar period spelled out in the 1923 Devonshire Paper. Despite certain unofficial racial privileges that Indians benefited from (including that of access to jobs in the colonial administration), the indigenous population was at that time allowed to acquire land in the delimited 'native reserves', whereas Indians were excluded from land ownership. Fully aware of the unequal rights between racially defined groups, Murumbi strategically navigated colonial categories to his advantage. Once registered as Maasai, he applied to get land, eventually succeeded and moved to Maasai territories with his father. Murumbi's experience reflect what I would coin as 'racial mobility': a change of social status within the system of racial hierarchy imposed by British authorities. Born of an interracial marriage in a state that did not administratively recognise his mixed background, Murumbi subverted racial definition and, more importantly, colonial policies. At a later stage, his identification as an African would positively serve his legitimacy among the Kenya nationalist movement. ⁵⁷

Murumbi's situation was not an isolated one. In 1925, a case was brought in a meeting the 'local native council' in Kyambu.

The Chairman stated that he had received an application from a Kikuyu woman married to an Indian for a mill site in the Reserve, and that he had refused this application as their children might claim to be Indians and as such they should not be in the Native Reserve. Waruhiu [an indigenous member of the council] objected most strongly and if such a precedent was created Indians would come and buy Kikuyu wives and so obtain a footing in the native reserve, thus a confusing situation would arise. The reserve is for the Kikuyu.⁵⁸

Here lie the administrative issues arising from intermarriages between distinct legally differentiated groups. There was no space (both literally and metaphorically) for mixed families in the segregationist society

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Rothmyer K., Joseph Murumbi..., op. cit., p. 35.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵⁷ Murumbi's mixed heritage and experience of intra-imperial mobility arguably contributed to his ability to navigate internationalist networks in 1950s. See Milford Ismay and McCann Gerard (2022), "African Internationalisms and the Erstwhile Trajectories of Kenyan Community Development: Joseph Murumbi's 1950s", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 57(1), p. 4. ⁵⁸ KNA/PC/CEN/2/14, Native council minutes Kyambu District, August 20, 1925.

that was being established. Additionally, land ownership was by nature linked to the question of inheritance. Children born of these unions were, as seen previously, commonly registered as Indians, which for the colonial government was a valid reason to exclude them from 'native lands'. Kikuyu council members apparently agreed with British views on the topic. This mistrust towards Indians is not altogether surprising, as it responded to the specific post-1923 context whereby the British government, after having seized lands from local communities for White settlement, pretended to defend indigenous interests by limiting the Indian diaspora's rights. In these circumstances of strong pressure on land, Kikuyu political representatives such as Waruhiu were keen to support British segregation policies which they believed were for their benefits.

These minutes also reported the indigenous men's fear of Indian men strategically "buying" indigenous wives. Keeping in mind that Waruhiu's words could have been distorted by the colonial administration to legitimise its political strategy, it is worth noting that women were herein referred to as a commodity like land. Mentioning the danger of Indian men marrying locally was also a patriarchal and racial argument that aligned with British policies: it supported indigenous men's authority while denying women's agency and advocated making the Kikuyu reserve an ethnically homogenous space. However, it is crucial to note that indigenous men's concern towards Indian-African marriages was actually never expressed in racial terms but solely in economic or social ones. In other words, if there was ever any indigenous hostility against exogamy at that time, it was primarily caused by the colonial policies' detrimental effects on the local populations' living conditions, rather than being rooted in a fear of racial mixing.

The phenomenon of intermarriage between Indian settlers and indigenous women in BEA has to be understood in light of both the political context of the early years of the British rule and Indian migrants' social and cultural realities. When British administrators discussed the matter primarily in political terms, racialist thinking still underlay colonial policies at that time. The very idea of race justified the colonial agenda, while in turn segregationist policies contributed to feed racial prejudices. 'Mixed-race' children represented a potential administrative challenge to the allegedly natural distinction between Indians and Africans. More importantly, they were evidence of Indian permanent settlement which thus undermined Britain's attempt to regulate Indian intra-imperial migration but also BEA's colonial strategy of maximising British control of land and resources through racial segregation.

The experience of early Indian settlers brings out a different social reality of cross-cultural relations since they did not necessarily share British concerns towards racial division. Indian family stories show that the circumstances that allowed such unions were rooted in several socio-cultural components, among which religion played a central role. Punjabi Sunnis were seemingly open to exogamy when the bride was already Muslim or accepted to convert. Yet, adopting their husbands' faith did not represent a social rupture from these indigenous women's communities, but rather reveals a certain acceptance towards cultural syncretism. 'Mixed-race' children, although mostly registered under the racial category of their Indian father were frequently socialised in both Indian and indigenous communities. In contrast, the Hindu caste system precluded the assimilation of an African wife and her children and the example of interracial wedlock in Lamu suggests that marrying locally might have been an irreconcilable commitment for Hindu men.

Ultimately, there was a significant discrepancy between British racial and political concerns on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the socio-cultural realities of the Indian diaspora and indigenous communities. Yet, as highlighted in the case of Murumbi's racial mobility, Indian settlers and indigenous people were aware of the colonial racial order and, in some instance, managed to work around it. In short, African-Indian marriages did not follow a strict scheme but rather were negotiated, more or less successfully, among local and migrant groups, whose lives and communal belonging were, at the same time, altered by British imperial expansion.

To conclude, the early years of the colony – which were characterised by the disproportionate over-representation of men among Indian migrants and British still ill-defined political planning – seem to have constituted a context enabling a relative acceptance of intermarriage between (Muslim) Indian settlers and indigenous women. These relations might have become less common with the hardening of racial policies in the post-1923 period. As already mentioned, the colonial discriminatory management of land became a source of political and social tensions between 'racially-defined' groups in the colony. In addition, the rapid growth of the Indian diasporic communities and the progressive change of demographics in term of sex

ratios (Indian women accounted almost for half by the 1950s)⁵⁹ and religious divisions (Muslims represented no more than 36% of the diaspora in 1948)⁶⁰ certainly altered the social conditions of Indian men's migration, and their attitude towards intermarriage.

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⁵⁹ Hill Althea (1975), "The Fertility of the Asian Community of East Africa", *Population Studies*, 29(3), p. 360.

⁶⁰ Mangat J. S., The History of Asians in East Africa..., op. cit., p. 142.

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