

India's Little Africa

A chance encounter in Gir culminated in photographer Ketaki Sheth's project on the Sidi, who migrated to Gujarat centuries ago

IT IS QUITE REMARKABLE THAT A STORY spanning a thousand years in Indian cultural history remains so unknown and uncharted in the country's narrative landscape.

What began as casual curiosity during a family vacation in 2005 at the Gir National Park in Gujarat—courtesy photographer Ketaki Sheth's fortuitous encounter with the Sidi in Sirwan (a village in the forest)—became a compelling obsession that involved spending the better part of seven years following the East African community that migrated to India centuries ago.

Distinctive in their appearance with curly hair, dark skin and African features, the Sidi are well entrenched in the Indian way of life and think of themselves as more Indian than African. They speak Gujarati—their mother tongue—and are Indian in food, dress and behavioural traits. However, unlike Indian Muslims, the Sidi are among the original believers in Islam and not converts, identifying, as they do, with Hazrat Bilal—the son of an Ethiopian slave who was part of the Prophet's primary circle of followers.

It is only in song, dance and spirituality though that they seem African. "The Sidi have retained something of their African spiritual world in the form of musical instruments, dances and spirit possession cults," according to scholar Mahmood Mamdani, third generation Ugandan of Indian origin and professor of African Studies at Columbia University.

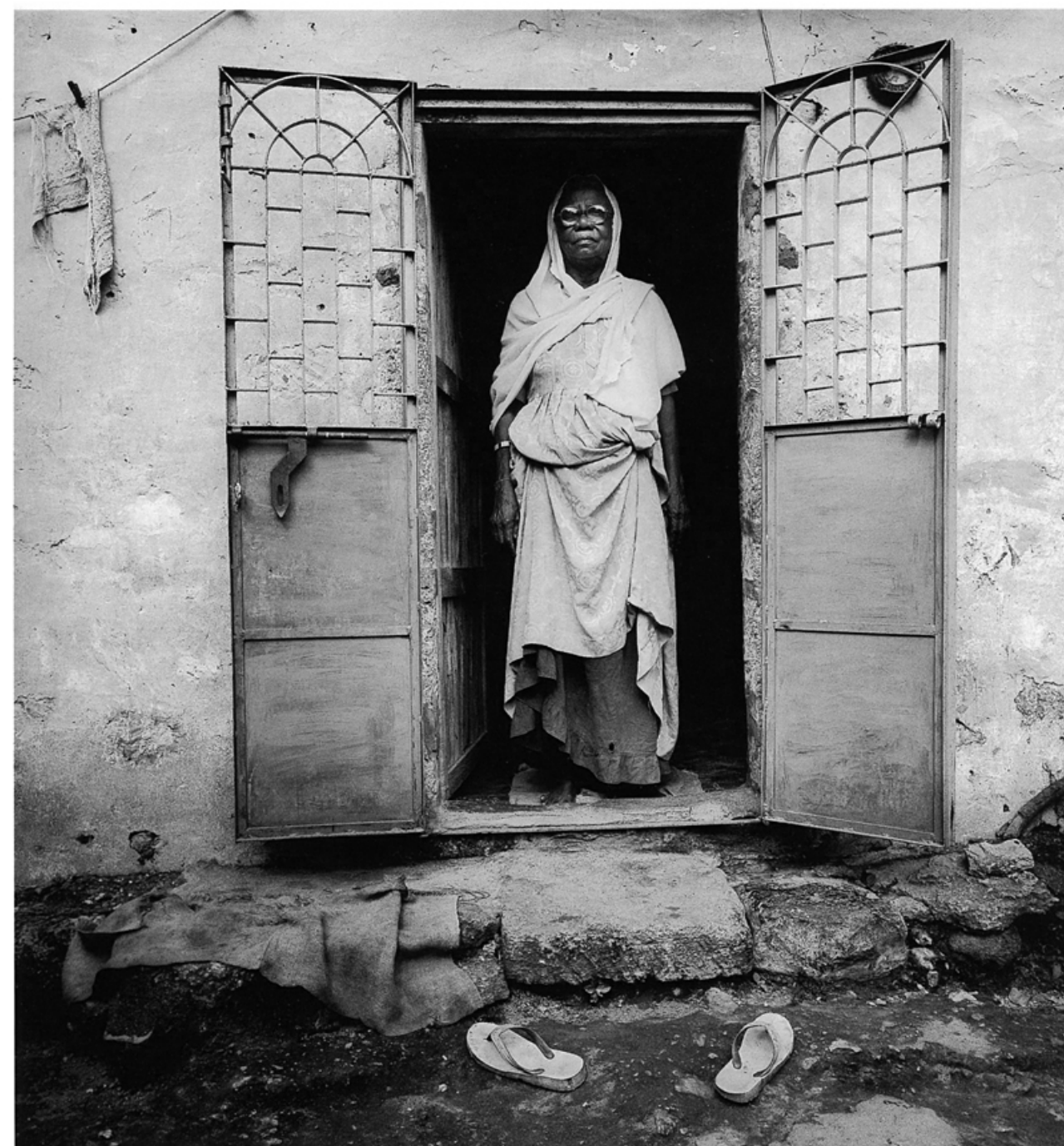
Apart from Sirwan and Jambur—two contemporary and exclusively Sidi villages of about 500–600 households in the Gir forest—Sheth travelled extensively across Gujarat and Karnataka, attending weddings, births and *urs* celebrations (the death anniversary of

the Sufi saint Moinuddin Chisti) and visiting *dargahs*, fields, homes and schools to throw some light on a population of roughly 65,000 Indians of African descent, settled mainly in Gujarat and Karnataka—and to a lesser extent in Mumbai, Goa and Hyderabad. The result? A photographic journey into the lives of one of India's least known communities called: *A Certain Grace: The Sidi; Indians of African Descent*.

While anthropological data on the Sidi is scarce and historical information tends to be "fragmentary" and "highly politicised", the research that does exist suggests they arrived in India in the ninth century as part of Arab-led armies that occupied Sindh, and then in the more successful Central Asian invasions from the 13th to 16th century. "By the 16th century, the Sidi had become prominent in the cavalry and artillery of many an Indian principality," writes Mamdani.

But it was really during the Portuguese colonisation that the Sidi community grew in the country. Most of the Sidi are descendants of slaves brought by the Portuguese mainly from their possession of the Mozambique.

However, the Sidi experience in India is not one of bloodshed and violence, which may explain their smooth assimilation. "Compared to the brutal unfolding of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the story of the Sidi is altogether longer, smaller and quieter," according to scholar and curator Rory Bester. Their main attraction was not cheap labour but loyalty—many were lifelong servants of ruling or upper caste families in India. Sheth's photographs then, as Mamdani writes, "allow us a privileged view, both intimate and comprehensive, of the beauty and dignity of a people once from Africa but now at home in India."



Facing Page:
Naginaben Adam at
90, Diu, 2006

Walking home from school, outskirts of Manchikere, 2006



Clockwise from left:

Patthar Kua colony, Ahmedabad, 2009

Girl with cat, Jambur, 2005

Sukhi, Jambur, 2005

Two boys at Munira's wedding lunch, Jamnagar, 2005



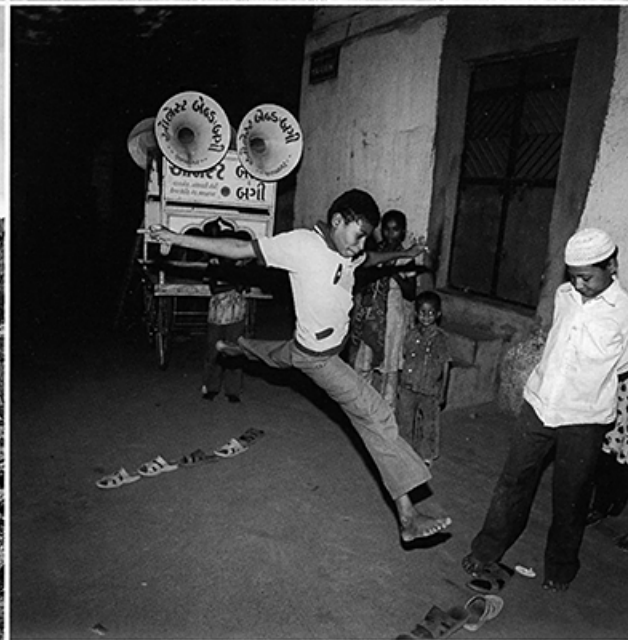
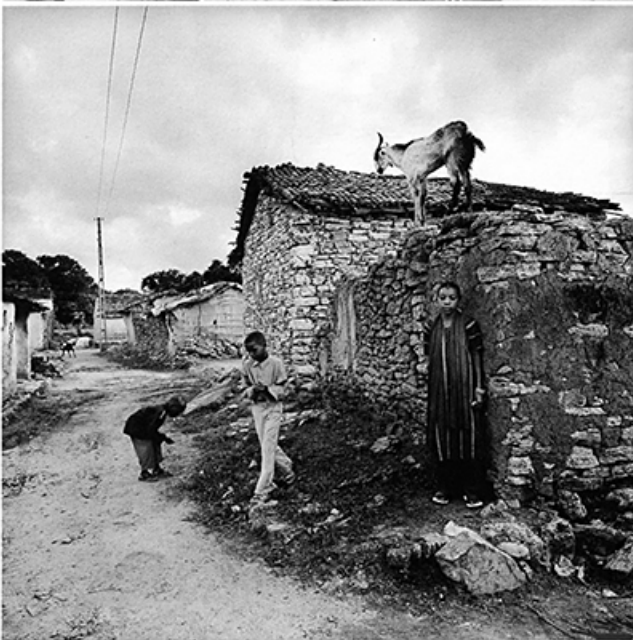
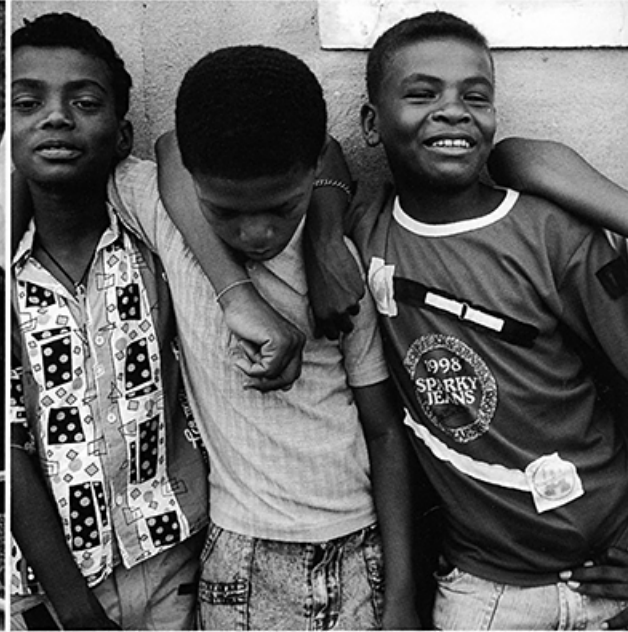
Clockwise from left:

Boy with a gun, Sirwan, 2009

Boys at the Jamnagar Jamaatkhana, 2008

Street game and Honest Buggy Band, Bhavnagar, 2007

Street scene, Jambur, 2006



The 2001 Kutch earthquake shattered his home, Anjaan, 2008



Najma on her wedding day, Jamnagar, 2008



Clockwise from left:
Newlyweds, Tasneem and Ashraf, Surendranagar, 2005
Twins at home, Jambur, 2009
Dressed for a wedding reception, Ratanpur, 2007
Anam and Muskaan, Mumbai, 2011

