



Hasanali Alibhai 1872-1918



Mohamedali A. Karimjee 1879-1940



Yusufali Karimjee 1874-1966

Three typical images of male members of the Karimjee Jivanjee family bear striking similarities. All look straight into the camera with serious, self-conscious expressions. Dressed for the occasion, they wear the Bohra turban, signifying their importance within the Bohra business community. Note that Yusufali, the family's representative in the European market, is wearing a tie and a western business suit, testament to the adaptability of dress within the context of Bohra identity.

Asians in Africa: images, histories and portraits

Gijsbert Oonk

Very little is known about the history of South Asians in East Africa, while much of what we know comes from foreign sources. This is not due to a lack of literate qualities; we know that South Asian merchants kept highly professional account books and corresponded regularly with distant markets. When the occasion demanded, they learned English, Arabic, Swahili and Portuguese to complement their knowledge of Gujarati and Kutchi. The historian could conclude that these men preferred to remain faceless – neither their family histories, nor even their community's history, was for sale.

Pictures and paintings may reveal new knowledge and insights on South Asian lives in East Africa. Taken for specific purposes, such as weddings or the beginning of pilgrimages or tours to India, they literally present 'faces' and 'real images' of the past. At the same time, they remain constructions of the

photographer, whose intentions often remain unknown. The scenes often represent photographic styles which go beyond the East-African context – as cultural constructions, they belong to international photography.

These pictures give an idea of the 'faces' of South Asians in East Africa at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Yet the exercise has limited potential, for in many cases we do not know when, why and by whom the picture was taken. Nevertheless, the history of these images gives some insight into how some South Asians in East Africa wanted to be represented, either to their families or to a wider audience.

For more information:

www.asiansinafrica.com

Oonk, G. 2004. *Asians in East Africa. Images Histories & Portraits.*

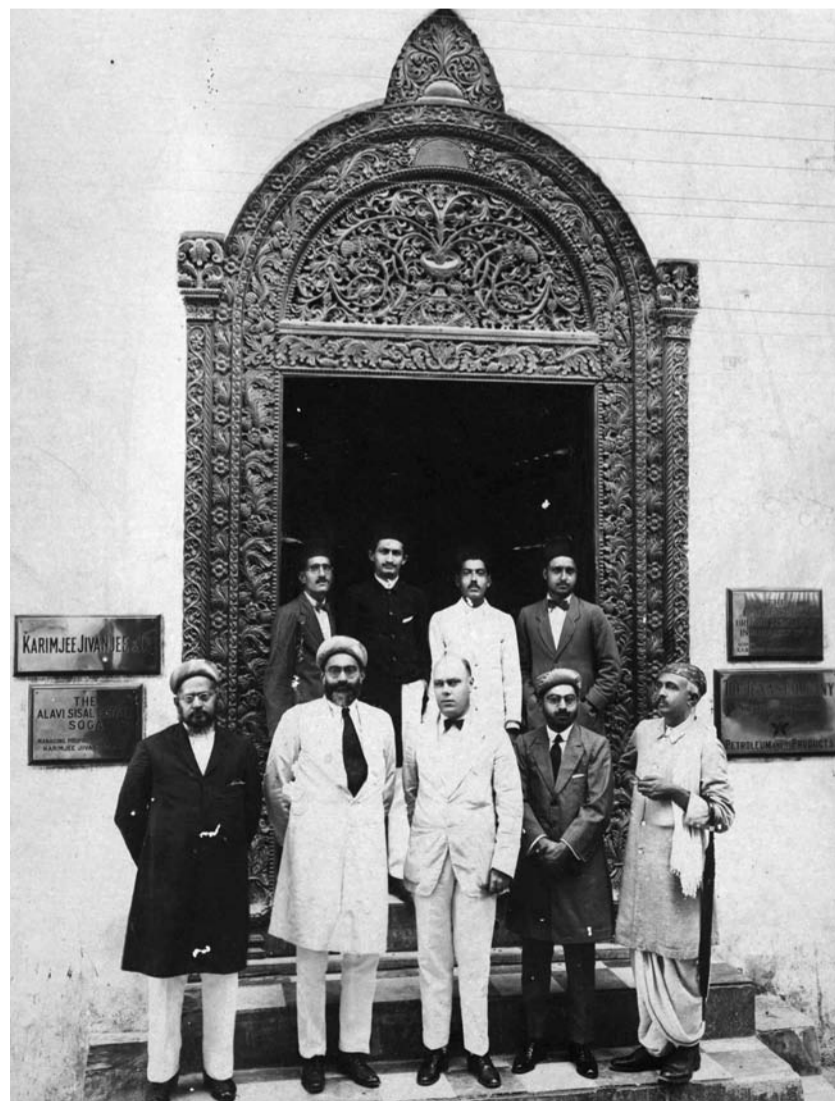
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Nanji Damodar 1880-1961

The picture of the Hindu Lohana Nanji Damodar was taken by an Indian photographer in Mombasa around 1920. In the tradition of 'swagger portraits', the picture bears, like European photographs of the same period, diluted traces of painted portraiture. Here Nanji Damodar is portrayed with a book in hand, suggesting a learned and intellectual background, while he may not have been a great reader at all. As in the case of the Karimjee family, dress is an important marker of identity. Here Nanji Damodar wears his black Hindu Nehru cap and white Indian dress. His shoes are too large, and may not have been his own: they are unpolished, unthinkable for a man of his standing. The photographer may have suggested he wear shoes to present a more formal character.



The original headquarters of the Karimjee Jivanjee enterprises, Zanzibar, 1924. Front row, left to right: Mohamedali A. Karimji Jivanjee; Yusufali Karimji Jivanjee; Mr. Boyac and Tayabali H.A. Karimjee. The picture was taken on the occasion of the visit of Mr. Boyac from Texas Company to finalise an export deal to Tanganyika with Karimjee Jivanjee and Company as sole agents. The members of the family wear formal dress, with long sleeves according to Muslim fashion. Typically, the European representative is in the middle of the photograph.

Gijsbert Oonk and Henk Schulte Nordholt were the convenors of the IIAS workshop *The South Asian Diasporas: the creation of unfinished identities in the modern world*, held in Rotterdam, 23-24 June 2005.