Growing up as a Parsi Zoroastrian in Mumbai (also known as Bombay), I regularly participated from age seven, along with my family and other Parsis, in sacred ceremonies and rituals in honor of saints Bava Gor and Mai Mishra at the chillia or memorial shrine of Bava Gor, built by a Parsi Zoroastrian man in 1947 in Mumbai (Fig. 1). Bava Gor and his sister Mai Mishra are revered saints of Sidis, Indians of African descent. The original shrines or dargah of Bava Gor and his sister Mai Mishra are in Gujarat and devotees of all faiths and backgrounds flock to their shrines, especially on festival days, seeking barakat (blessings of abundance) and karamat (miracle healing) for all kinds of problems from health to financial difficulties to fertility, family, and property issues. Devotees include Hindus, other Muslims, Sikhs, and Parsi Zoroastrians, like myself (Figs. 2–3). Certain cultural practices are performed for religious purposes and other for secular economic reasons. Although Sidis have assimilated into Gujarati culture in terms of using Gujarati language and modes of dress, they maintain some differences in terms of a social and cultural identity, carving a unique place as a distinct minority group within the caste hierarchy of Gujarat. Most importantly, the racially different Sidis reinvented an identity that claimed a lineage descended from saint Bava Gor. The ritual ceremonies I describe below honor Bava Gor and his sister Mai Mishra.

AFRICANS IN INDIA

Although very little is known about Sidi saint Bava Gor, there are some historical references to him as a saint. Sixteenth century historian Ad Dabir, who wrote about King Mahmud Khilji’s military campaign in South Gujarat in 1451, mentions the shrine of Bava Gor as a place of pilgrimage where Mahmud Khilji paid his respects. Later in the 1800s, British colonial officers made references to Bava Gor’s shrine in their geological surveys when they discovered the famous agate (carnelian) mines in the terrain surrounding Bava Gor’s shrine (Basu 2004a:62).

Scholars point to a long history of flourishing trade, commerce and travel between the African continent and India that goes back to the first century CE, when the Indian Ocean was “the world’s busiest commercial thoroughfare”—from the Horn of Africa, through the Red Sea Coast, moving down to the East African Coast, and across the Indian Ocean to ports in India on the western coast of Gujarat and the Konkan Coast (Sadiq Ali 1996:17). The diverse commodities exchanged included Indian textiles, ivory, rhinoceros horn, and slaves. However, historian Joseph Harris states that before Omani Arabs and Europeans began the slave trade, many Africans migrated voluntarily to different parts of Asia, as merchants, traders, sailors, and many other professions. Many intermarried with non-Africans and settled down (Harris 1996:9). While Africans have traveled to India via different routes, from different parts of Africa, their migrations have not been chronologically systematic, linear, or continuous (Sadiq Ali 1996, Chauhan 1995, Basu 2001, Shroff 2005).

At different time periods, Africans in India were called Habshis, Abyssinians, Kafirs, and Sidis. Habshi, the name widely used for most Africans, was derived from Habash, the Arabic name for Abyssinia, or present-day Ethiopia. Kafir, from the Arabic word kafir, translates as “infidel” or “non-believer of Islam,” and Sidi is thought to be a corruption of the Arabic Sāiyīd or “Lord” (Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 2003:190, Basu 2001:255). Most of the contemporary African-descended communities in Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Goa refer to themselves as Sidi (sometimes spelled Siddi).
Habshis or Abyssinians have charted a significant role in Indian history. Regularly recruited as military slaves, many of them rose to prestigious positions in the military and in the government in medieval India. Among those Africans who gained prominent status, Ethiopian-born Malik Ambar distinguished himself as an astute statesman and military strategist. From 1600 to 1626, Ambar held the reins of power in the state of Ahmednagar and himself became royalty when he married his daughter into the Nizam Shahi royal family (Sadiq Ali 1996:63–104, Eaton 2006:115–35, Robbins and McLeod 2006:45–67). Equally famous are the royal Sidis of Janjira who, from 1621 onwards, established themselves as Nawabs (rulers) for three centuries, defying colonial powers and Indian rulers alike (Chauhan 1995, Chittnis 2005, Robbins and McLeod 2006, Shroff 2007, Oka and Chapurukha 2008) (Fig. 4).
Contemporary Sidi communities in India are not descendants of royal and military Habshis of medieval history like Malik Ambar. They are thought to be descended from a later period of the slave trade controlled by European colonial powers, Arabs, and Gujarati merchants, who brought them to work within princely and wealthy merchant households, in a feudal system, as royal bodyguards, domestic servants, and keepers of stables, among other tasks.

Some Africans who escaped from princely or wealthy homes and some who were freed by British patrol boats found their way in the 1800s to the shrine of Bava Gor in Gujarat. The shrine thus served as a refuge for men and women displaced from different regions of Africa who did not constitute a homogenous community. As a shelter and a place of resistance, the shrine enabled an inventive social organization of a community—a brotherhood of faikirs (spiritual healers) who traced their ancestry to Bava Gor. The land around the shrine of Bava Gor belonged to Gohil Rajput Rajahs and was given to Sidis as inam or reward for their services to the royal family (Basu 1993).

**BAVA GOR: SUFI MYSTIC HEALER**

Although there are no historical records of Bava Gor’s life, a vibrant Sidi oral tradition surrounds Bava Gor and his arrival in India from Africa. According to the oral history as retold by Sidis today, Bava Gor was an Abyssinian military leader on a mission from Africa via Arabia to subdue evil spirits and black magic practitioners in Gujarat. He was helped in this task by his brother Bava Habash and sister Mai Mishra. The oral tradition also represents Bava Gor as a Sufi mystic and a merchant whose entrepreneurial skills expanded the agate bead industry within India and further to Africa (Shroff 1990). This genealogy, which connects indirectly to the history of military and royal Sidis of the past, more importantly links Sidis to the healing powers of Bava Gor as a Sufi mystic who subjugated evildoers and restored order. The Sidi oral tradition emphasizes the crucial role of Bava Gor’s sister Mai Mishra as the one who eventually subdued the evil that was embodied in a woman named Makkhan Devi.

6 A Sidi woman caretaker lays the peacock feather brush/pichi at the head of the shrine of Sufi saint Kamilsha Bava in Mumbai. (2005)

7 As part of their duties, the caretaker/mujavar must offer the healing energy of the saint with the peacock feather brush/pichi to a devotee. This is the shrine of Sidi saint Aemai in Surat, Gujarat. (2009)
This poetic legend of Bava Gor enabled Sidis to embrace a significant social role as *fakirs* (spiritual healers) that transformed them from displaced slaves to subjects located within a history and with a defined sense of purpose. As *fakirs* embodying the spiritual legacy of Bava Gor, Sidis’ racial difference became a marker signifying spiritual power; thus, curly hair and other distinctive physical characteristics are perceived by Sidis as signs of inherited special powers and healing abilities derived from Bava Gor and Mai Mishra (Basu 1993:294). Additionally, the brotherhood of *fakirs* that was primarily established to set up kinship ties for Sidis as a *jamat* (community) and for their own healing, identity, and livelihood became a source of healing for “outsiders” as well. Today, at the shrine of Bava Gor devotees of all faiths and religions honor Bava Gor and Mai Mishra (Fig. 5).

All over Gujarat and in Bombay, there are memorial shrines/chilla to Bava Gor. Sidi families attached to the shrines are called *mujavar* (caretaker, and spiritual specialist of the shrine). In Gujarat and in Bombay, Sidis are caretakers at shrines of other Sidi saints like saint Nagarchi Pir, thought to be a brother of Bava Gor, whose shrine is in Jambur village, Gujarat. Sidis also work as caretakers at shrines of Muslim Sufi mystics like Kamlisha Bava in Mumbai (Fig. 6). People from different faiths and different economic backgrounds frequent Sidi shrines and *chilla* as devotees and supplicants. The *mujavar*/caretakers are usually consulted by devotees regarding a range of different personal matters, and some devotees come for healing. The *mujavar* offers blessings of the saints with a symbolic use of the *pichi* /peacock feather brush, a sacred healing object that is placed at the head of every shrine. The brush is laid on the head of the *chilla*, from where it draws energy. It is then placed on the head and shoulders of the devotee so that healing energy and blessings are transferred from the saint into the body of the devotee (Fig. 7).

**URS CELEBRATION WITH GOMA/DHAMMAL**

In the eleventh month, called Rajab in the Muslim calendar, the *urs* ceremony honoring Bava Gor takes place, first at the original shrine of Bava Gor in Gujarat, and then at other shrines. Devotees in thousands from neighboring cities of Gujarat and others from Bombay participate in the three-day ceremonies and receive blessings of the saints. At the Parsi *chilla* every year, Sidis are invited to perform their sacred *goma/dhammal* dance as part of the *urs* celebrations. The *goma/dhammal* ceremonial dance involves singing *jikkar* (sacred songs), drumming and ritual dancing through which Sidis invoke their ancestral saints inviting their presence into the ceremony through *hal* (collective spirit possession). In this way, Sidis as descendants of Bava Gor, embody the saints and bring *barakat*/blessings and *karamat*/ miracle healing presence into the *urs* celebration rituals (Basu 1993, Shroff 2004a) (Figs. 8–9).
ceremony (Fig. 10). The ceremony begins with a low wooden goma tempo, with singers seated on the floor. This jikkar goma we can say ‘(Bava Gor’s dhammal as explained by a young Sidi man: “Both song, dance, and drum. Sidis often use the Gujarati word dhammal—goma is a Swahili word—it’s the same thing—Bava Gor ni Dhammal (Bava Gor’s dhammal)—goma is also dance and the rhythm is also goma, so if you hear music and someone asks ‘What’s happening?’ we can say ‘goma is going on’ and so the song is also goma.”)

The word goma, derived from the Swahili word ngoma, means song, dance, and drum. Sidis often use the Gujarati word dhammal interchangeably with goma, as explained by a young Sidi man: “Both goma and dhammal are the same. Dhammal is a Gujarati word, goma is a Swahili word—it’s the same thing—Bava Gor ni Dhammal (Bava Gor’s dhammal)—goma is also dance and the rhythm is also goma, so if you hear music and someone asks ‘What’s happening?’ we can say ‘goma is going on’ and so the song is also goma.”

The goma/dhammal dancing and drumming are an integral part of all rituals honoring Bava Gor and Mai Mishra. Each Bava Gor chilli in Gujarat and Bombay creatively constructs its own rituals and ceremonies. At the Parsi chilli of Bava Gor in Mumbai, every year Sidis are invited to do the dhammal—the latter word is commonly used by devotees and Sidis. Often the word is associated with the high-decibel drumming and the joyous environment of festivity, rapture, and spirit possession that the vigorous drumming and dancing create.

At the Parsi chilli, the day to honor Mai Mishra is called the ghat, which is performed first; the day to honor Bava Gor called sandal. Each ceremony begins with drumming and chanting of jikkar. The first part of the dhammal, called baithi dhammal (seated dhammal), is begun with the singing of jikkar in a slow tempo, with singers seated on the floor. This jikkar invokes Sidi ancestral saints, who are invited to be present and bless the ghat ceremony (Fig. 10). The ceremony begins with a low wooden pedestal placed on the floor, close to the chilli. The pedestal is covered with a satin cloth and consecrated with the application of sandalwood paste and attar (perfume). Upon this pedestal five silver-plated pots of different sizes anointed with sandalwood paste are arranged one on top of the other, with a silver plated coconut placed inside the topmost pot (Figs. 11–12). Finally the whole installation is adorned with jewelry as well as red and gold embroidered cloth, to resemble the adorning of a bride (Fig. 13).

At the feet of the installation are placed offerings of fruit, bangles, silk and satin cloths, all covered with a mound of rose petals.  

11 Silver-plated pots are anointed with sandalwood paste to consecrate them for the ghat ceremony in honor of Mai Mishra. (2004)

12 A silver-plated coconut placed on the last pot completes the basic structure of the installation that represents Mai Mishra for the ghat ceremony. (2004)

13 Adorned with jewelry and a red and gold embroidered cloth, Mai Mishra is welcomed into the ghat ceremony as a newly decorated bride. At the foot of the installation devotees place offerings of fruit, bangles, silk and satin cloths, all covered with a mound of rose petals. (2004)

Once again Sidi men participate by performing the baithi dhammal with the Sidi drummers. The baithi dhammal is performed on Friday. On the third day of the ceremony, i.e. Saturday, Mai Mishra is welcomed into the chilli.

The intensified tempo of drumming and dancing invites the presence of the saints Bava Gor and Mai Mishra. The most important item is the sandalwood paste or barakat of sandal. The pedestal is elevated experience of high energy as healing powers of saints Bava Gor and Mai Mishra. The sandalwood paste is placed on the first tray in a round mold. Each tray carries objects that symbolize the gifts of the saints—garlands, flowers strung together like a shawl, peacock feather brush, a woman dressed in an embroidered cloth, to resemble the adorning of a bride (Fig. 19). Since the 1980s, the Indian government has regularly invited Sidis to perform their arts at state-organized folk arts festivals, the most famous of which is the khadi dhammal (standing dhammal). A high level of energy, joy, and excitement prevails, as Mai Mishra is now believed to enter the ceremonies as a beautifully decorated bride. The intensified tempo of drumming and dancing invites Sidis and spirit mediums of Mai Mishra and Bava Gor among them into a state of collective spirit possession. Sidis refer to this elevated experience of high energy as majha, translated as collective joy or ecstasy. At this point, devotees approach some of the mediums to discuss problems or get the barakat/blessings and karamat/miracle healing assistance to mitigate all kinds of problems (Shroff 2004a, 2011b).
The *ghat* ceremony for Mai Mishra is performed on a Thursday known as *jumma raat*, the evening before Friday (*jumma*), a day when Muslims collectively offer prayers. The *ghat* installation honoring Mai Mishra as a bride remains standing through Friday with the *dhammal* dancing and drumming continued on Friday. On the third day of the ceremony, i.e. Saturday, Mai Mishra is given a ritual farewell; the installation is removed carefully and the area is cleared for the *sandal* ceremony in honor of Bava Gor.

Once again Sidi *dhammalis* inaugurate the ritual preparations for the *sandal* with the slow tempo *baithi dhammal*. Three silver-plated round *thali* or trays are laid out on the floor, on a cane mat. Each tray carries objects that symbolize the gifts of the saints—*barakat* blessings of abundance from the saints Bava Gor and Mai Mishra. The most important item is the sandalwood paste or *sandal* after which the ceremony is named. Sandalwood, known to possess healing properties, signifies the blessings and miracle healing powers of saints Bava Gor and Mai Mishra. The sandalwood paste ladled into three small silver-plated bowls is placed in the three different silver *thalis*. Each tray also carries the *galef* or satin embroidered sacred cloth to be placed on Bava Gor’s *chilla*. *Chadder* (flowers strung together like a shawl) are placed around the circumference of the *thali*. Finally the *pichi* (brush of peacock feathers) is placed on top of the satin embroidered cloths. A satin cloth finally covers all the objects in the *thalis* (Figs. 14–15).

Three devotees who are also spirit mediums carry one *thali* each upon their head and walk in a procession that goes around the *chilla* with the Sidi *dhammalis* drumming and dancing at the head of the procession. One woman is always selected to carry a *thali* and that woman is a medium for Mai Mishra. In my Parsi Zoroastrian family, my sisters and my niece are mediums for Mai Mishra and one of them is chosen to carry a *thali* on her head in the procession (Fig. 16). As explained by a devotee: “What the medium carries on the head are the wishes, the hopes, and the faith of the devotees.”

After completing seven rounds, the mediums place *thalis* at the head of the *chilla*. The sandalwood paste/sandal from the bowls is applied onto the *chilla* and some of it is distributed to the devotees after the ceremony is over. Energized by the music, singing, and collective joy, the spirit mediums make themselves available for individual consultation with devotees. The final *dhammal* is sung as a farewell and as an expression of the devotees’ joy in participating in this ecstatic ritual (Figs. 17–18).

Sidis differentiate the sacred *goma/dhammal* performed in honor of their saints from the *dhammal*, which is performed in public as entertainment. For secular performances Sidis wear a specially designed costume adorned with beads and peacock feathers (Fig. 19). Since the 1980s, the Indian government has regularly invited Sidis to perform their *goma/dhammal* dance as part of state-organized folk arts festivals called *mela* or in official...
state events that honor visiting dignitaries like Nelson Mandela. Other official occasions include Sidis being invited along with other Indian indigenous groups to inaugurate the opening ceremonies of the 19th Commonwealth Games held in New Delhi, in October 2010. One Sidi goma dance group has performed internationally, mostly in Europe and in Africa.\textsuperscript{10}

Despite such public acclaim, the majority of Sidis live today on the economic margins of society. Although many Sidis work primarily as domestic helpers, drivers, painters, car mechanics, and as daily wage laborers, some work in government jobs among Sidis of Gujarat and Bombay (Fig. 20). The Indian government’s designation of “Scheduled Tribe” or ST category\textsuperscript{11} has enabled Sidis in some regions of Gujarat state to gain benefits such as jobs in the government-run railways or the post office. Sidis in areas without the ST status would like similar jobs, which are desirable since they provide a steady income and benefits like pensions (Shroff 2008b, 2009).

\textbf{17} At the end of the sandal ceremony, a final goma/dhammad dance is performed as a farewell and expression of the devotees’ joy in participating in the ecstatic ceremony. (2004)

\textbf{18} Children participate in the goma/dhammad dance and learn drumming and the sacred songs/jikkar from their early years. (2004)

\textbf{19} Sidis are often invited to perform the goma/dhammad at public events by the government, for which Sidis wear a specially designed dress adorned with beads and peacock feathers. Here Sidis perform in Bhavnagar, Gujarat. (2009)


\textbf{21} Small flower stalls set up by Sidi vendors line the pathway up to the original shrine of Bava Gor in Gujarat. (2009)

\textbf{22} Sidis sell flowers strung like a shawl/chadder, coconuts, perfume, incense, and sweets for the devotees at the shrine of Bava Gor. (2009)
There is much diversity within contemporary Sidi communities of Gujarat and Bombay, not to mention other states of India such as Karnataka where Sidis reside.12 Not only do Sidis have different trajectories of migration, they have assimilated also to different regional cultures, and some Sidis today can be considered middle class. In urban areas like Mumbai, the younger generation often have mainstream jobs; for example, a Sidi woman featured in my documentary (Shroff 2005) works part time as a pathology lab assistant and as a beautician along with her shrine duties and responsibilities. Another young Sidi works as a fashion model who promotes designer clothing like Pepe Jeans along with his job for an insurance company. Yet another Sidi has his own band attached to a five-star hotel. In Bombay and Gujarat, Sidi families continue the tradition of working as shrine caretakers. At the main shrine of Bava Gor in Gujarat, most Sidis sell flowers, coconuts, tea, snacks and other items for devotees (Figs. 21–22).

In conclusion, the Sidi community today survives with dignity despite financial struggles. They live harmoniously as a minority group within a diverse population of Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians, and other religious groups in contemporary India. Their sacred ceremonies enrich India’s cultural heritage in their unique invention of blending their African and Indian ancestry.

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Notes

1 Several Parsis along with devotees of other religious faiths revere the Sidi saints. Parsis, also called Zoroastrians, are Indians of Persian descent who migrated to India circa the seventh century and settled on the west coast of India in Gujarat. Well-known navigational routes through established trade and commerce connections led some Persians to migrate to India after the Arab invasion of Persia in the seventh century. In the 1990s my father, a practicing Zoroastrian, discovered Bava Gor as a source of additional spiritual sustenance. For further discussion on my father and Parsis as Bava Gor devotees see Shroff 2004a and b and 2009. For Parsi history in India see Kulke 1974, Laframm 1996, Palsetia 2001, Kamerkar and Dhunjisha 2002.

2 Harris points out that the East African slave trade undertaken by Arabs, which predated the Atlantic slave trade, was conducted on a smaller scale and was not the lucrative business that it became for European colonizers. Arabs used small sailing boats called dhows, powered by strong monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean and transported small numbers of slaves, rarely more than two hundred, unlike the thousands later carried in European vessels (Harris 1971:xiii).

3 Historian Richard Pankhurst writes that “Most slaves taken from Africa to India would, for geographical reasons, have originated on the eastern side of the continent. [and] would probably have included a substantial if not a predominant, proportion of Abyssinians” (Jayasuriya and Pankhurst 2003:190).

4 Goma or dhammal is a sacred dance performed by Sidis, Indians of African descent in Gujarat to honor their saints Bava Gor and Mai Mishra.

5 Interview by author with Shabbir Sidi, in Mumbai, while attending a dhammal performance July 2005.

6 Jikkar, derived from zir in Sidi practice, refers to the repetition of the name of God. For Sidis, jikkar includes devotional songs to Bava Gor, Mai Mishra, and other Sidi saints.

7 The ceremonies and rituals of goma practiced by the Sidis have many similarities to the diverse healing rituals of ngoma practiced in different parts of Africa today. As studied by John Janzen (1992), ngoma rituals offer counseling through the interpretation of dreams, divination, etc., and some ceremonies include drumming, and dancing. Similar healing rituals such as Candomble in Brazil and Santeria in Cuba are practiced in African-descended communities.

8 Interview by author with Khursheed, Parsi Zoroastrian devotee at Parsi chilli, in Mumbai, while attending a ghat ceremony July 2005.

9 Sidis offer different perspectives on the specially designed dress for their public performance of the goma/dhammal dance. One Sidi points out that their peacock feather dress was designed for them by representatives of the government who work with a state-supported organization called the West Zone Culture Center (Shroff 2004a and b).

10 Ethnomusicologists Nazir Jairazbhoy and Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy initiated a worldwide performance tour for a group of Sidis and produced CDs of their jikkars (sacred songs). Additionally, they have films on Sidi music and musical instruments, especially the Sidi musical bow, the maehanga. All this contributes to a growing body of work on the African diaspora in India.

11 It is important to mention here that the state has arbitrarily assigned ST (Scheduled Tribe) status to Sidis in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat, leaving out Sidis in other areas of that state. Similarly, Sidis in the northern area of the southern state of Karnataka struggled many years to gain ST status; however, Sidis in other areas of that state have been excluded from this category (Prasad 2006). In the Constitution of India, under articles 341 and 342, the state invests in the President of India the power to designate ST status to any community on the basis of “primitiveness” and “backwardness,” both of which are vague criteria that are shaped by colonial discourse (Pathy 2000, McMillan 2005). For Sidis of Karnataka’s struggle to gain ST status see Prasad 2005 and Obeng 2007a. For Sidis of Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh see Yimene 2004.

12 Art historian Henry Drewal has studied the exquisite art of stitching patchwork quilts or kwnamli by Sidis in the southern state of Karnataka (Drewal 2004, 2005, 2008, 2011). Professor Drewal along with Sidi elders, and women quilters successfully formed the “Siddi (sic) Women’s Quilting Cooperative” in Maimalli, Karnataka, and exhibitions of these Sidi quilts have been traveling to different sites in the US. See also his essay “Soulful Stitching” in this issue.